MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing

8

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 125: Exquisite Dice, Apprehension from Rolling a One (Part Two)
Chapter 126: Hundred-Yard-High Cliffs, Thousands Tilt over Lavafalls
Chapter 127: Upon the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, Three Idiots Return to Olden Times
Chapter 128: Bloody Rain Sought Flower, Vicious Battle Against White No-Face
Chapter 129: Crack the White Armor; Curious Magic Shatters the Cursed Shackles
Chapter 130: Smiling as Red Robes Fade
Chapter 131: Atop Mount Taicang, Thousands of Kinds of Dust Settle
Chapter 132: How My Lord Aches for the Flower, How I Ache for My Lord
Chapter 133: By the Heaven Official’s Blessing, No Paths Are Bound
Chapter 134: Extra 1— Lantern Riddles on Yuanxiao Night
Chapter 135: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part One)
Chapter 136: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Two)
Chapter 137: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Three)
Chapter 138: Extra 3—The Ghost King’s Bedtime Story
Chapter 139: Extra 4— Oh Goodness! The Cave of Ten Thousand Gods
Chapter 140: Extra 5— The Ghost King’s Birthday
The Story Concludes
Appendix: Characters
Appendix: Locations

Appendix: Name Guide
Appendix: Pronunciation Guide
Glossary: Genres
Glossary: Terminology
Footnotes
About the Author
Other works by MXTX
Back Cover
Newsletter

Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

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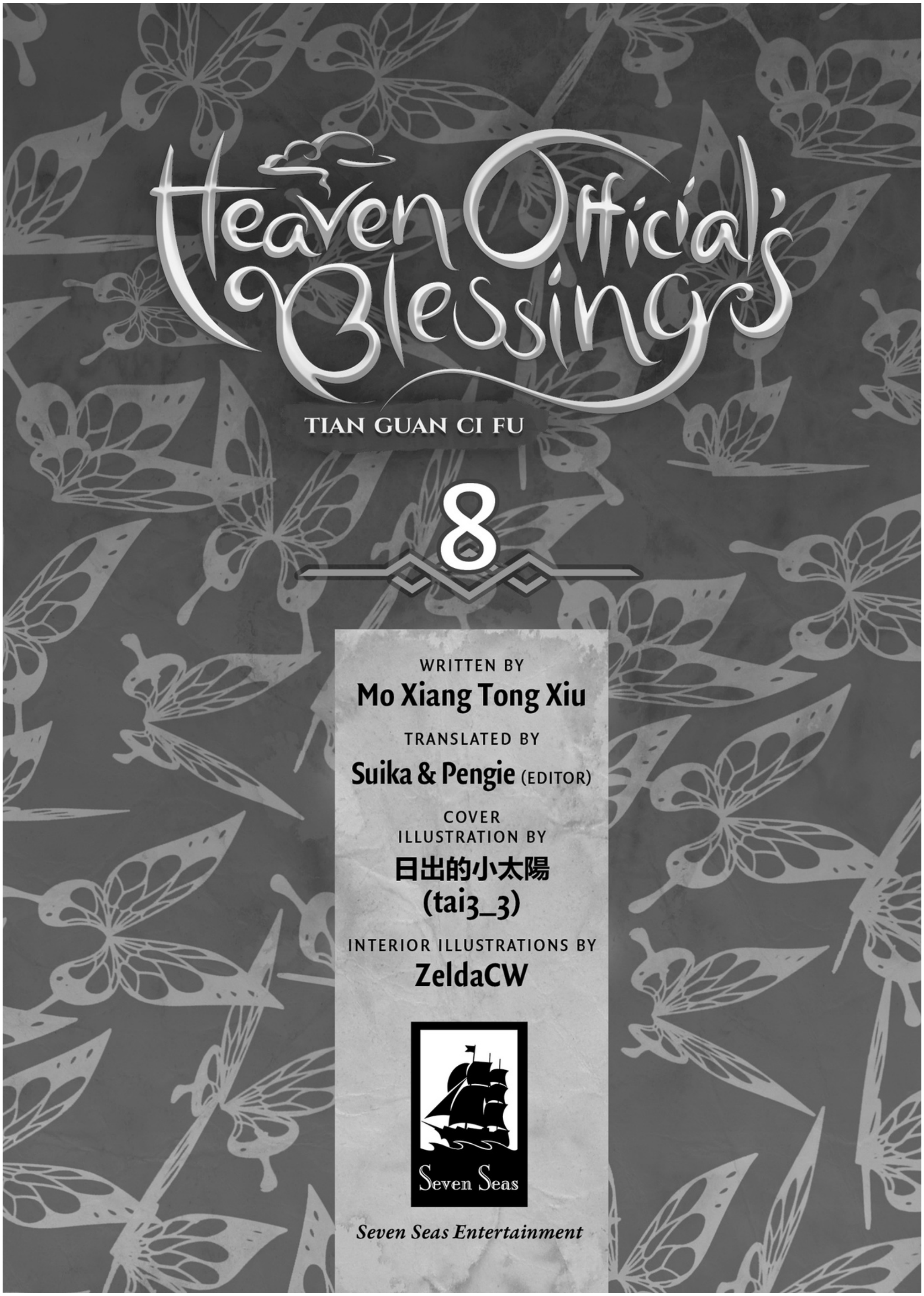

Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

8

WRITTEN BY

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu

TRANSLATED BY

Suika & Pengie (EDITOR)

COVER
ILLUSTRATION BY

日出的小太陽
(tai3_3)

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY

ZeldaCW

Seven Seas

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TRANSLATION: Suika
EDITOR: Pengie
ADAPTATION: Lexy Lee
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT & COVER DESIGN: Karis Page
PROOFREADER: Jehanne Bell, Alex "Muun" Singer
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
BRAND MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 125: Exquisite Dice, Apprehension from Rolling a One (Part Two)
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTERS 231-232)

CHAPTER 126: Hundred-Yard-High Cliffs, Thousands Tilt over Lavafalls
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTERS 233-234)

CHAPTER 127: Upon the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, Three Idiots Return to Olden Times
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 235)

CHAPTER 128: Bloody Rain Sought Flower, Vicious Battle Against White No-Face
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTERS 236-238)

CHAPTER 129: Crack the White Armor; Curious Magic Shatters the Cursed Shackles
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 239)

CHAPTER 130: Smiling as Red Robes Fade
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTERS 240-241)

CHAPTER 131: Atop Mount Taicang, Thousands of Kinds of Dust Settle
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 242)

CHAPTER 132: How My Lord Aches for the Flower, How I Ache for My Lord
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 243)

CHAPTER 133: By the Heaven Official's Blessing, No Paths Are Bound
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 244)

CHAPTER 134: Extra 1— Lantern Riddles on Yuanxiao Night
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 245)

CHAPTER 135: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part One)
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 246)

CHAPTER 136: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Two)
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 247)

CHAPTER 137: Extra 2—The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Three)
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTERS 248-249)

CHAPTER 138: Extra 3—The Ghost King's Bedtime Story
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 250)

CHAPTER 139: Extra 4— Oh Goodness! The Cave of Ten Thousand Gods
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 251)

CHAPTER 140: Extra 5— The Ghost King's Birthday
(CONTAINS WEB SERIALIZATION CHAPTER 252)

APPENDIX: Character & Name Guide

Glossary

Contents based on the Pinsin Publishing print edition originally released 2021

Chapter 125:
Exquisite Dice, Apprehension from Rolling a One (Part Two)

VEILED IN DARKNESS, the figure took a step forward. The firelight finally revealed his identity—Mu Qing. His face was dark, and he didn't say a single word.

Feng Xin grabbed Xie Lian. "I was searching for people in the Heavenly Capital, and I was doing just fine! But then, out of nowhere, someone struck me from behind; why else would I have fallen?"

"*He* was the one who struck you?" Xie Lian asked, his mind spinning.

"It was him—without a doubt!" Feng Xin said with absolute certainty.

"And you were knocked out instantly?" Xie Lian asked.

"Basically!" Feng Xin replied. "In any case, Your Highness, watch out for him! Don't let him near you! Or just seize him outright!"

"Bullsh—" Mu Qing swore in spite of himself, but Xie Lian quickly cut in.

"Wait! Feng Xin, there's a problem here. If he ambushed you from behind and you were knocked out immediately afterward…how do you know that Mu Qing was the one who did it?"

Feng Xin hadn't expected this question, and he didn't have an answer. Mu Qing seized the opportunity and scoffed.

"The Heavenly Capital was ablaze and completely chaotic at the time. For all you know, *anyone* could have hit you. But, as usual, you're trying to dump your mess on *me*. Can't you just admit you're wrong?"

Feng Xin held on to Xie Lian as he stood up. Tone dark, he insisted, "No, it was definitely you!"

"Do you have any proof to back that up?" Mu Qing demanded.

"It was precisely *because* the Heavenly Capital was ablaze," Feng Xin enunciated. "There was fire everywhere, and the person behind me cast a shadow on the ground. Even though I didn't get a chance to look behind me, I saw the silhouette when I fell and the way it moved when it attacked. That was *your* shadow!"

As the two exchanged verbal blows, Xie Lian watched intently.

Mu Qing still wouldn't back down. "All this talk, but you still didn't see anything clearly. It's normal for shadows to distort reality. You think you can prove that I attacked you with nothing but a shadow as evidence? There's no way you saw enough to identify me in the moment before you blacked out!"

"You know that I can identify you with ease," Feng Xin said. "His Highness knows it too."

Xie Lian did know that. The three of them grew up and cultivated together; they couldn't be more familiar with each other's appearances and attack styles. None of them would need to see the others' faces to identify them.

"Your Highness, you two came here together?" Feng Xin questioned. "Did he do anything suspicious on the way?"

"Um…" Xie Lian said.

To tell the truth, Mu Qing had been acting extremely suspicious the entire way, visibly nervous and jittery. But at a time like this, it wasn't easy for Xie Lian to say so in front of Mu Qing.

"No! Think about it. It's suspicious that he even came to begin with," Feng Xin continued. "Is he the kind of person who'd put himself in danger to rescue anyone? Is that even Mu Qing?"

Mu Qing's face grew darker. "Don't speak in such absolutes. It's hardly plausible for *you* to have sired a son, yet here we are."

"…"

Xie Lian could tell this was headed in a bad direction, so he swiftly intervened. "All right, don't argue. Keep it up and we'll have to train idioms to calm down!"

"Besides, if I was the one who knocked you out, why would I go through the trouble of luring them here to find you?" Mu Qing added.

"Because you didn't think that I could identify you after you struck me from behind!" Feng Xin responded. "And who knows where the hell this place even is! When you lured His Highness and the others here, your goal might not have been to find me. Crimson Rain Sought Flower got separated from you on the way, didn't he?"

"Are you saying I'm an impostor who deliberately lured His Highness and the others into a trap? Well, sorry, His Highness and Crimson Rain Sought Flower have been with me the entire time; there's no way they wouldn't have noticed."

"That's true, yes…" Xie Lian said.

But that was only true for Mu Qing en route—what if he'd been switched after they entered the underground Wuyong palace? They couldn't be sure.

Mu Qing appraised Feng Xin. "Your Highness, I think you'd better stay away from *him*. After all, he's been lying there since we came. Crimson Rain Sought Flower is nowhere to be seen, and now *he's* trying to tear us apart. Don't you think *he's* the one acting more like an impostor?"

White No-Face had disguised himself as them before. He could certainly do so again.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "How about this—why don't you two say something that only the three of us would know? That way, we can verify everyone's identity."

"Like what?" Mu Qing asked.

After giving it a moment of thought, Xie Lian asked casually, "What were you two screaming about on top of the snowy mountain?"

Their faces froze. Xie Lian tucked his hands into his sleeves.

"If your answers don't match, it means one of you isn't the real deal. We can move on after we've sorted this out."

The pair exchanged looks of dismay, and neither said a word. At first Xie Lian hadn't been all that curious about what they'd said behind his back, but now he couldn't help wanting to know.

Moments passed, and Feng Xin still didn't answer the question. "You're both missing the point," he said instead. "I never said I think he's an impostor."

Mu Qing narrowed his eyes. "So what *were* you trying to say?"

"From the beginning, I've thought he's the real Mu Qing. He can't stand either of us, so I'm not surprised he pulled something like this," Feng Xin said bluntly.

Mu Qing's hands clenched into fists, his knuckles cracking. Then he raised his open palm, ready to strike! The wounded Feng Xin barely dodged the blow, and the two of them began to brawl in earnest. Although Xie Lian had expected this, his head couldn't help but throb.

"Calm down… Why don't we train some idioms, hmm?"

As they traded blows, Xie Lian could sense that the murderous aura surrounding them was intensifying. Several haphazardly thrown fireballs brightened the entire chamber, and only then did Xie Lian see that there were shelves all around that were stacked high with a collection of sabers, spears, swords, and other such weapons. The arms emitted an ominous, chilling air.

This was likely an armory. No wonder the air was choked with a cold, murderous aura.

Xie Lian himself used to own such an armory. It had been very dear to his heart, and he'd often lose track of time while visiting it. But this armory filled him with a strange, intense dread, and he didn't want to stay here another minute. Still, he didn't know whose words to trust at the moment, so he didn't know which side to help—truth be told, they'd both been acting very suspicious!

In the end, Xie Lian had to call out, "Ruoye!"

Well, he'd bind them both first and talk after!

Ruoye had been waiting for an opportunity to show off and leapt at this chance. Yet before the white silk band could shoot forth, Xie Lian sensed another chill from behind him.

The direction of his attack changed in an instant; he caught Ruoye and swung it behind. The moment he felt the white silk band catch on to something, Xie Lian seized it and yanked forcefully. However, whatever it had caught didn't move. Dread washed over Xie Lian, and the next moment, he was yanked backward by the other end of the silk band. His back crashed solidly into someone’s embrace, and something cold and hard jabbed into his waist.

Xie Lian was stunned into silence. Although his physique didn’t make him look particularly tough, Xie Lian knew he was shockingly strong. So unless his target was some gigantic creature, who could yank him over so easily? Just as he was about to strike back, he felt a hand wind around his waist and heard a voice from above his ear.

“Gege, it’s me.”

“San Lang?” Xie Lian asked.

Sure enough, the arm that circled him was wearing a silver vambrace carved with maple leaves, butterflies, and ferocious beasts. When he whipped his head around, he saw that the one who had caught him was a tall, slender man clad in red. The man was calm and collected, and a silver scimitar hung at his hip. The thing that had jabbed into his waist earlier was most likely the scimitar’s hilt.

Hua Cheng!

Xie Lian instantly understood what had happened—Ruoye had dragged him to Hua Cheng’s side on purpose. He’d essentially been fighting them two-against-one, so of course it had been easy to yank him over.

Steadying himself, he was left speechless as he picked Ruoye up. Eventually, he managed to mutter at it, “You little traitor…”

Ruoye lay unmoving, wisely playing dead. Xie Lian decided scolding it wasn’t worth it. He tossed it aside.

“San Lang, what happened? Weren’t you right behind me? Where’s Master?”

“This place is very strange,” Hua Cheng said. “The path sealed itself when we reached the halfway point, both ahead of us and behind us. Then we bumped into something a little difficult, so taking care of it took some time.”

If even Hua Cheng said it was a little difficult, it really must have been.

Xie Lian was faintly worried. “Are you all right?”

“Of course,” Hua Cheng said. “But I don’t know where the state preceptor is now, so we may have to keep going deeper. By the way, what are those two fighting about? So noisy.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian glanced over. “Them…”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing finally noticed what was going on outside their conflict. They called a temporary truce.

“Hey! Be careful!” Mu Qing shouted. “Don’t casually hang around people who pop out of nowhere!”

“Your Highness,” Feng Xin called out a moment later, “don’t just pounce on him the moment you see him!”

Xie Lian hurried to explain himself. “What?! What do you mean by that?! I’m not the one who tackled him! It was Ruoye’s fault…”

He trailed off, suddenly realizing why they were so nervous. Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing were suspicious of impostors, so…shouldn’t Hua Cheng be subject to that same scrutiny?

Was the one standing before him the real Hua Cheng?

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow. “So now you’re all worried whether I’m the real thing, hmm?”

Supporting his elbow with one hand and leaning his cheek against the other, Xie Lian began to inspect him seriously. Hua Cheng noticed his gaze and stared back at him.

“…” Met with that stare, Xie Lian could inspect no longer. After a moment of contemplation, he came to a conclusion. He turned back to his other companions.

“I think he’s real.”

“What you *think* might not be correct,” Mu Qing snapped. “Don’t forget where we are—this is White No-Face’s old lair. Anything is possible. Figure out a way to test him.”

“Well, that’s easy,” Hua Cheng chuckled. “Gege, come here. I’ll tell you a good way that’ll clear up your doubts immediately.”

Thus, Xie Lian stepped over to Hua Cheng, modestly requesting his guidance as he did. “What good way?”

“Can you please not do everything he tells you to do? He’s under suspicion right now, do you understand?!”

“Recite the first half of the verbal password to my communication array, and I’ll tell you the second half,” Hua Cheng said. “Then you’ll know whether I’m the real thing.”

“…”

The two whispered in each other’s ears, then Xie Lian turned around, lightly clearing his throat. “Well…he’s the real thing,” he told the others.

Feng Xin finally didn’t seem as tense anymore, but Mu Qing was still doubtful. “Are you sure? Don’t lose your marbles the second you look at his face.”

“I just told you he’s definitely real!” Xie Lian argued. “Why do you two always have to act like I’m some—”

“All right, that’s over and done with,” Hua Cheng said. “Back on topic. Gege, why were those two fighting?”

With one hand over his forehead, Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng a brief rundown. “And that’s about it… To be honest, I really don’t know who’s more suspicious.”

“Really? *He’s* clearly the most suspicious one,” Hua Cheng replied, gesturing in Mu Qing’s direction.

Mu Qing was vexed. “If you’re going to slander me, at least have a reason, all right? Don’t blame me every time something happens.”

“Fine,” Hua Cheng said. “Then let me ask you this—what’s on your wrist?”

At that question, Mu Qing’s face changed color in a flash. He staggered back a few steps, wanting to flee, but Feng Xin was faster and seized him easily.

“Your wrist?”

There, on his wrist, was a cursed shackle.

Veins popping on his forehead, Mu Qing pushed Feng Xin's hand off him and glared at him furiously.

When Xie Lian saw that thing, he went silent in shock and his arms dropped to his sides. "Mu Qing, your wrist…?"

Mu Qing didn't reply, and his expression was dark.

"I suggest you respond honestly to the following questions," Hua Cheng said. "Why did Jun Wu summon you to the Palace of Divine Might? What did he say to you? Why did you receive better treatment than the other heavenly officials, returning unharmed? Why are you behaving so uncharacteristically by volunteering to come to Mount Tonglu to rescue people despite the danger? What is the purpose of that shackle on your wrist? Why did you lure us here?"

"Wait!" Seeing the situation go downhill, Mu Qing backed a step away hastily. "Don't attack me yet! Let me explain myself!"

Hua Cheng opened his arms. "Please, do go on."

"Tell me first, were you the one who struck me?" Feng Xin demanded.

After a pause, Mu Qing finally said through gritted teeth, "Technically…yes, I did. But it's not what you're thinking!"

Feng Xin was furious, but Xie Lian said, "Let him continue."

Mu Qing inhaled deeply and admitted, "That's right…I was the one who hurt Feng Xin."

"I *knew* it was you!" Feng Xin yelled.

Mu Qing turned to Xie Lian. "But it was because the Heavenly Capital was done for! He was still wandering around while everyone else was trying to escape; he refused to leave and wouldn't listen. If he kept meandering around, he would've burned to death in the flames of hell sooner or later. That was why I decided to knock him out and pass him off to you!"

"But you didn't pass him off to me. Feng Xin went missing and ended up here instead," Xie Lian said.

"Well, there was a little accident on the way," Mu Qing said.

“What kind of accident?”

“The fetus spirit,” Mu Qing said. “It ambushed me from behind, bit me and wouldn’t let me go. It refused to let me take him. I didn’t get a chance to grab him before the Heavenly Capital started reshaping itself, so…”

So Feng Xin was somehow moved here, along with the piece of land beneath him. If that was the truth, then Mu Qing had meant to do a good deed, but instead made things worse and screwed Feng Xin over. It was a very awkward situation.

“Why didn’t you tell us this sooner…?” Xie Lian asked.

Feng Xin was dubious. “Are you sure your plan wasn’t to let me burn to death in the Heavenly Capital? To just knock me out and leave me there?”

Mu Qing’s face stiffened, and he turned to Xie Lian. “The fetus spirit was crouching on his chest the entire time, and that ghost woman Jian Lan came over eventually too. I figured she would wake Feng Xin or move him instead of just watching him burn to death.”

Now, Xie Lian understood. Mu Qing had likely come to rescue Feng Xin out of guilt; he was the one who knocked his rival out, after all, so his sense of responsibility made him put in some effort. That would explain why he was so jittery the entire way—he was probably worried that Feng Xin had died.

Still, this set of excuses was hard to believe.

Feng Xin pulled at his hair madly. “What a mess you’ve made! Didn’t you already know I was looking for them? If you didn’t knock me out, maybe I would’ve found them!”

“The fetus spirit is White No-Face’s subordinate. White No-Face wouldn’t do anything to harm them,” Mu Qing said calmly. “And they didn’t want to go with you, so staying behind was a waste of time. You could call for them a thousand times and it’d be pointless. Why not escape the Heavenly Capital alive first, then find a chance to look for them later? Why did you insist on recognizing your son when the situation was so dire? I simply made the best possible decision for all parties in the moment.”

Feng Xin wasn't nearly as calm as Mu Qing. "Best possible decision, my ass! You can only say that because it's not your family! Wait—so you're saying you were trying to save me by making me leave?"

"That's enough nonsense," Hua Cheng cut in. "Just answer my questions. What did Jun Wu say to you?"

Mu Qing went silent. He clearly didn't want to answer.

Hua Cheng stared at him. "Are you currently under his command?"

"Not at all!" Mu Qing instantly replied.

"Then please explain that cursed shackle," Hua Cheng said.

Mu Qing had been arguing for so long that his mouth had gone dry. A moment later, he croaked, "If I told you…you might not believe me."

"When we asked you earlier, you denied everything left and right. Of course it's going to be hard to believe you when you admit it now," Feng Xin said.

"You want to know why I didn't admit to it earlier?" Mu Qing asked, slightly indignant. "If I'd told you what had happened, you never would've believed me anyway! Who'd admit to anything when that's the attitude they can expect? I wouldn't be able to explain myself if I *did* admit to anything, so I might as well not bother!"

Besides, although they were lucky that nothing had happened to Feng Xin, the whole incident was rather embarrassing. Considering Mu Qing's personality, it made sense that he wouldn't want to admit to what he'd done.

Xie Lian, who'd been listening patiently the whole time, said, "Just let him finish."

Mu Qing glanced at Xie Lian, and it took a moment for his words to stagger out with difficulty. "This is…because…he wanted me to harm His Highness. I refused, so…"

At this point, even he felt so uncomfortable that he couldn't continue.

"So he put a cursed shackle on you in a fit of rage?" Hua Cheng finished for him.

Mu Qing didn't respond.

“Nothing else?” Feng Xin demanded.

There was nothing particularly notable in Hua Cheng’s expression. “Do you honestly believe what you just said?”

“…”

Mu Qing looked absolutely humiliated. “Believe me if you want,” he spat coldly. “There was a misunderstanding about why I knocked Feng Xin out, but I’m not under anyone’s command.”

“Mu Qing…you’d better just tell the truth,” Feng Xin responded.

When Mu Qing saw his expression, his knuckles cracked. “That *is* the truth! What did you want to hear? That I surrendered to Jun Wu, and now I’m out to destroy you all? That’s the person everyone thinks I am, right? Your Highness?!”

He gazed at Xie Lian, emotions brimming in his eyes. Xie Lian stared pensively at him for a long time. Just as he was about to speak, Hua Cheng crossed his arms and moved to shield him, staring down Mu Qing.

“There’s no need to glare at His Highness like that,” he said coolly. “After all, you’ve got a bad track record.”

“I didn’t ask you!” Mu Qing countered. “What bad track record?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “What bad track record, you ask? How did your cultivation go after you stole that piece of blessed land from His Highness?”

His smile was laced with frost, and his tone was even nastier. Shocked and mortified, Mu Qing went pale and unintentionally staggered back a few steps.

“You…!”

Mu Qing knew that his behavior hadn’t been great when he fought with Xie Lian over that piece of blessed land, so he was afraid of people bringing it up and pointing fingers. While Hua Cheng’s tone was light, it was tangibly aggressive.

Mu Qing was surprised, but Xie Lian was too. How on earth did Hua Cheng know about that incident?

Neither Xie Lian nor Feng Xin were the gossipy type; they never liked talking behind people's backs or spreading rumors. While Mu Qing's departure was a huge shock to them at the time, they never said anything or complained to anyone about it. As for the fight over that piece of blessed land, Xie Lian had never wanted to talk about the incident ever again and had never spoken of it to anyone. He trusted that Feng Xin was the same.

The thirty-some heavenly officials wouldn't have voluntarily told anyone that they stole someone's spiritual land for cultivation; they would've either kept it completely secret or twisted the truth. And so, Xie Lian had never heard any talk about the incident.

So how had Hua Cheng learned of it?

Even though he had planted countless spies in the Heavenly Court, that incident had truly happened far too long ago. It had been eight hundred years, and most of the ones involved had never said a single word. Did Hua Cheng really manage to dig up information about that ancient mess?

"How do you know about that? Who told you?" Mu Qing questioned.

He looked back and forth between Feng Xin and Xie Lian, and in the end, his eyes stayed on Xie Lian.

"There's no need to glare at His Highness—he never tells me these things. You were yelling about it at the top of that snowy mountain. Did you forget?" Hua Cheng jeered.

Mu Qing's face had gone even paler. That lessened Xie Lian's confusion somewhat, though he couldn't help but wince. When Feng Xin and Mu Qing started going at each other's throats, they'd often furiously dig out the skeletons in each other's closets and stop at nothing to air the other's dirty laundry. They would definitely seize upon ancient messes like that one, hurling them at each other like bombs.

It did make sense that hearing what had happened had angered Hua Cheng, but Xie Lian still had a nagging suspicion that there was something deeper underneath.

For he had also remembered something else: the tale of the red-clad ghost who set hundreds of civil and martial temples ablaze. Hua Cheng became famous overnight when he defeated thirty-three heavenly officials and obliterated every single one of their temples and shrines across the entirety of the Mortal Realm.

Xie Lian had long forgotten how many heavenly officials had fought him over that blessed land; their titles, their faces, and even the words they said were lost to him. He could only vaguely recall that there were about thirty of them.

How many were there exactly? Could those thirty-some heavenly officials have been the same ones he encountered on that fateful day?

If they were, didn't that mean Hua Cheng knew of the incident long before he became a supreme?

It was a moment before Mu Qing gritted out, "That was then, this is now! And in either case, I never thought of—"

As Mu Qing argued, Xie Lian suddenly gave him a swift one-legged kick and shouted, "Watch out!"

Caught completely off guard, Mu Qing was knocked straight to the ground. *Whoosh, whoosh.* Two projectiles whizzed past him, trailing sharp, chilling air, and were nailed into the wall. Mu Qing leapt to his feet and dusted off the footprint on his chest.

"Did you do that on purpose?! Attacking me first?"

"Sorry, sorry—that really wasn't intentional!" Xie Lian replied, otherwise occupied.

If it *had* been intentional, Mu Qing would've been sent crashing into the wall to form a human-shaped hole.

Everyone turned to see two sharp swords impaled in the wall, the blades still vibrating.

"Who's there?!" Feng Xin shouted.

"There's no one," Xie Lian said. "They moved on their own!"

Clink-clank, chlink-chlunk. A murderous aura exploded from all around them. The weapons hanging on the walls began to shake violently, with so much force that the entire chamber quaked from the clamor.

"Let's get out of here, quick!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Yet when he dashed to where the entrance used to be, Feng Xin shouted, “Why are you running that way?! There’s no way out over there! Where’s the door? This chamber can’t not have a door! How do we get out?”

“There *was* a door here!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “But it’s gone now! What’s going on with those weapons; why did their killing intent explode out of nowhere?”

Using only two fingers, Hua Cheng caught a longsword that came flying at him and easily snapped it into nine pieces. The shards scattered across the ground.

“It’s been too long since anyone’s used them, and they’ve gotten lonely. They get the urge to kill when they sense someone enter. That’s all.”

The other two unconsciously turned to look at Mu Qing, who immediately cried, “It’s got nothing to do with me!”

“But,” Hua Cheng said, “you’re the one who led us here.”

“I only pointed this path out because I saw the fetus spirit!” Mu Qing countered.

“Only *you* saw it,” Hua Cheng replied.

Mu Qing clenched his fists. He had nothing to say to that.

Feng Xin spoke up. “Well, what do we do now? Can’t these weapons calm themselves down?”

Before Hua Cheng could answer, Xie Lian remembered the methods he’d used in the past to face similar nefarious creatures. “It’s possible!” he mumbled. “But…we must let them kill.”

“There’s no exit right now, though,” Feng Xin said. “And there’s only the four of us locked up in here. How do we let them kill? What can they kill?”

Just as Xie Lian was about to speak, Hua Cheng said, “Three of us.”

“What? Three?” Feng Xin questioned.

“Just correcting you, that’s all,” Hua Cheng said. “There are only three of us locked up in here.”

Xie Lian whipped his head around, and sure enough, Mu Qing—the fourth person—had vanished from the armory! Really and truly! There was nothing but empty air where Mu Qing had stood.

“How can this be?!” Feng Xin asked, dumbfounded. “He was just standing there!”

Hua Cheng wasn’t surprised, since he had already run into something similar. “We’re in White No-Face’s territory right now. Everything follows his command, and he fears nothing; of course he can spirit people away as he wishes.”

“…”

Feng Xin hadn’t wholly believed the things he’d accused Mu Qing of, and the sharp words he’d exchanged with his old rival were mostly uttered out of anger. But now, he really didn’t know what to say. It was a long moment before he finally managed, “Your Highness…Mu Qing, he…could he really have…?”

“Let’s not talk about this right now,” Xie Lian quickly replied. “These weapons are about to riot. We have to think of a way to calm them down—otherwise, we’ll be chopped to mush!”

With that, he pulled Fangxin off his back. However, Hua Cheng resolutely pressed down on his hand.

Taken aback, Xie Lian turned and saw Hua Cheng staring at him intently. Red was slowly spreading around the rim of his eye.

“Gege, what are you planning to do with that sword?” he asked darkly.

Chapter 126:
Hundred-Yard-High Cliffs, Thousands Tilt over Lavafalls

XIE LIAN BLINKED. “I wasn’t planning on doing anything…”

“Then why did you draw that weapon?” Hua Cheng demanded.

“To…defend myself?” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng’s expression was terrifyingly dark, and he squeezed Xie Lian’s hand harder. “*How* do you plan on defending yourself? Put that sword down!”

That was the first time Hua Cheng had ever spoken to him in such a tone or worn that kind of expression. It shocked Xie Lian.

“Who are you to force him to put down his sword?” Feng Xin said, alarmed. “Let him do what he wants!”

A battle axe hurtled straight at them. Xie Lian raised his blade and slashed with one swift motion, sending the axe flying. “How do I plan on defending myself? Like…*this*!”

Only then did Hua Cheng’s demeanor and tone relax a little. Still, he didn’t let Xie Lian go. “You don’t need to defend yourself. Just stand behind me. Put the sword down.”

While on the move, Feng Xin accidentally stepped on his bow, which was still on the ground. He retrieved it and gripped it in both hands, raising it high to wield like a sword, then batted away a meteor hammer. He glanced their way warily. “What are you doing, grabbing him like that? Are you actually the real thing? Your Highness, are you sure you’re the only one who knows Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s verbal password?”

Xie Lian realized that Hua Cheng’s spiritual communication password wasn’t a secret between the two of them alone. A third person had heard it before.

Jun Wu!

He had heard it very clearly at the Palace of Xianle when he forced Xie Lian to contact Hua Cheng and monitored their conversation.

But Xie Lian still felt that the person standing before him was the real Hua Cheng, without a doubt. It was just…he must have thought of something unpleasant, which was why he was acting this way.

After a moment of contemplation, Xie Lian replied, “All right,” and put Fangxin away.

In the next second, the scimitar was unsheathed with a flash of silver light!

The entire armory shimmered brilliantly the moment Eming emerged. Sparks flew, and the cracking of metal reverberated and echoed nonstop. Xie Lian and Feng Xin stood motionless and trapped at the center of the chaotic light show, hemmed in by chilling glares and killing aura.

After no more than ten blows, Hua Cheng turned around and re-sheathed his scimitar. Xie Lian’s gaze moved from Hua Cheng to the ground beneath him.

Eming had slashed hundreds of weapons to pieces…

Xie Lian crouched, feeling grave pity as he picked up two sword fragments. “Those were all such good, rare swords…”

“Your Highness,” Feng Xin spoke up just then. “The door. A new door appeared!”

Xie Lian dropped the fragments and stood up. “I see. So we can only leave once we’ve dealt with the weapons.”

Opening the doors should’ve required the spilling of blood, but Hua Cheng had forced them open more directly. Just as that thought crossed Xie Lian’s mind, Hua Cheng took his hand and started dragging him out the door.

Seeing that Hua Cheng was boiling with murderous intent, Feng Xin asked them both, “What do you plan on doing next?”

“Find Master and Mu Qing, of course,” Xie Lian replied.

“And then, if Mu Qing really surrendered to Jun Wu, I’ll take his shit life,” Hua Cheng stated calmly.

“…”

The trio exited the armory and walked for a while. Xie Lian hesitated, but in the end, he still asked the question that was nagging at him.

“San Lang, did you think I was going to stab myself earlier?”

Hua Cheng didn’t respond, but his expression was still extremely sour.

“I wouldn’t have,” Xie Lian added.

Hua Cheng gave him a look. “Really?”

That look made Xie Lian feel quite guilty. At one point in his life, perhaps he really would have done that—in a truly dire situation. But now, he never would again.

“Yes! I promised you,” Xie Lian replied. “Besides, there were so many weapons. Sabers, spears, swords—wouldn’t I have been reduced to mush if they all stabbed me? Ha ha ha ha…”

He started to laugh, but the sound died in his throat. Hua Cheng’s head had jerked back to stare at him the moment he said the word “stabbed.” His gaze was hard to describe, but it obliterated all the words Xie Lian had to say.

Without warning, Hua Cheng reached out and wrapped his arms around him, hard.

Feng Xin, bringing up the rear, was shaken at the sight. “What the fuck?! I’m still here, you know!”

Xie Lian blinked and patted Hua Cheng’s back. “What’s wrong?”

“Your Highness, please don’t laugh like that anymore,” Hua Cheng whispered. He hugged Xie Lian tightly. “It’s not funny, really… It’s not funny at all.”

“…”

Recalling how upset Hua Cheng had been when he picked up the skulls coated with corpse poison, Xie Lian was apologetic. “I’m sorry. I won’t joke about that with you again. I just didn’t want you to worry; I didn’t think it’d have the opposite effect.”

The mood startled Feng Xin, and he stood there baffled for a while, unsure how to react. Eventually, he said, “I…agree? Since he’s so serious about it…”

Hua Cheng finally released Xie Lian. “Let’s go,” he said quietly.

Without the state preceptor to lead the way, the three of them had no choice but to continue into the depths of the palace. They hadn’t been walking for long when Xie Lian sensed something unusual in the air.

“Don’t you think…it’s gotten hotter?” Xie Lian said.

When they initially entered the underground palace, a haunting chill had permeated the area. But after walking for a while, the air around them had started to feel warmer and warmer until it was sweltering.

Feng Xin felt it too. He glanced back, then stopped in surprise.

“Your Highness, behind us!” Feng Xin pointed. “There’s a light!”

When the others turned, they also saw a light behind them, slowly moving closer.

It was rather strange to stumble on an unknown light source in the pitch-black underground. Had someone come?

By the time the light revealed its true appearance, Xie Lian finally realized that the suffocating, sweltering heat in the air wasn’t his imagination. The light itself had brought it to them.

A bubbling, scarlet-gold lava stream was rolling down the slope toward them. The lava outside had flowed into the underground palace along the watercourse!

Oh no! Xie Lian cried internally. Suddenly, he sensed someone rapidly approaching from behind, then dashing past. He tossed his hand, and his silk band whipped out in an instant.

“Please wait! We just need to ask for directions!”

The man was barely able to dodge, but it did slow him down for a moment. In the light of the nearby lava stream, they could make out the man’s face.

“Mu Qing!” Feng Xin shouted. “You bastard, stop right there!”

As if Mu Qing would do any such thing. Without another word, he broke into a run.

The others were about to give chase and strike when the ground shook violently. The scarlet-gold lava surged and swelled over the river's banks, spreading with great speed and rushing straight toward them! They were about to be overtaken, but Xie Lian had already encountered an identical problem before coming here. This time, the difficulty level was just a little bit higher.

"Feng Xin, there are probably many empty-shelled people in the lava," he said. "They'll float, so you can step on them to keep from sinking!"

Then he targeted an empty-shelled person vigorously paddling its arms in the lava flow and jumped on!

When he landed, Xie Lian was delighted to discover that these empty-shelled people were larger than the ones he'd previously encountered. Even when he touched down on their backs, they only dipped slightly and kept floating on the surface of the lava stream. As long as the creatures didn't start anything, they could practically serve as little boats!

Feng Xin targeted one and leapt aboard. He brandished his bow and threatened the empty-shelled person, "Swim properly! Don't sink!"

The threat of a weapon, naturally, made the empty-shelled person work even harder, not daring to offend him. Meanwhile, Hua Cheng only had to cross his arms and glance down for his empty-shelled person to behave and abandon all thoughts of trying anything wicked. It swam the fastest, going full power the whole way.

As for Xie Lian, he joined his hands together in a prayer and very sincerely negotiated with his empty-shelled person. "Take me for this ride, please take me for this ride! I'll burn incense for you afterward! You don't want incense? Then what offerings do you want? Just let me know!"

The empty-shelled person was obviously extremely dissatisfied, and every so often it would swing its arms to try to force him off. But Xie Lian was as sticky as gum, and even as he tumbled, he refused to be bucked. As usual, Xie Lian had found himself in the worst position of them all!

The three of them rode these creatures and flowed with the current. The farther downstream they went on their rafts, the steeper the slope became and the faster they went. Over and over, they had to dodge obstacles jutting up from below the molten rock; it was a journey of endless perils.

After a while, they finally caught up to Mu Qing.

“Mu Qing! Why are you running?!” Feng Xin yelled.

Mu Qing was also using an empty-shelled person as a surfboard, and he shouted his response over his shoulder. “What, should I wait for you all to attack me together?”

There was a bow in Feng Xin’s hand but no arrows, so he could only shout back. “We won’t attack you! First explain how you suddenly disappeared from the armory!”

Mu Qing looked back again, sneering. “You all—”

Before he finished, Xie Lian saw what lay ahead. His pupils shrank rapidly, and he shouted, “Ahead of you!”

Mu Qing whirled around. Only then did he discover that their path was coming to an abrupt end.

Some sort of underground chasm opened up in front of them, with a vertical drop hundreds of meters down. The lava rushed toward it, faster and faster as their sloping path grew steeper, carrying them toward the precipice. Mu Qing was caught by surprise at the sudden drop, and by the time he came to his senses, he was already tumbling through the air.

Mu Qing and the empty-shelled person under his feet disappeared in the blink of an eye. The other three were only a few moments behind him, rushing toward the cliff’s edge.

At the last second, Ruoye flew out far behind them and wound itself a few times around an upturned palace eave, then tied itself into a knot. With one hand gripping Ruoye and the other firmly around Hua Cheng, Xie Lian sent the other end of the silk band toward Feng Xin.

“Catch!”

With the silk band to link them, the three clumsily steadied themselves. They were only six meters away from the drop at most—if they’d been just one step slower, they would have gone over. They had literally saved themselves on the edge of a precipice. But lava was still pouring down nonstop, so Xie Lian gave another order.

"Withdraw!"

Ruoye quickly shortened itself and carried the three of them toward the palace. Soon after, they leapt onto the roof. It was a larger building than the ones surrounding it, so its roof was quite spacious. There was no fear of its stone foundation getting washed away by the lava, so they could relax for now.

After steadying himself for a moment, Feng Xin stared at the cliff's edge in shock. It was a long moment before he said in disbelief, "Did Mu Qing…fall?"

Xie Lian had just barely managed to steady his pounding heart. Wiping away beads of sweat on his forehead, he panted and replied, "He didn't!"

Poking his head out to peer over the furthest edge of the palace rooftop, Xie Lian could see a long saber nailed into the rocks at the edge of the cliff—and a pair of hands clutching its hilt tightly. Below the hands was a red, flustered face with vigorously gritted teeth.

Right now, Mu Qing was in a horrifying position. He was hanging parallel to the waterfall of flowing lava. Fiery sparks splashed his face, literally burning his brow.[1] If it wasn't for the sheen of spiritual light protecting his body and blocking most of the searing heat, his whole head would've been on fire, burnt beyond recognition. But that protective layer of spiritual light wouldn't last long, and his bones would still dissolve into nothing if he fell into the pool of lava!

It was nerve-racking just to see him. Feng Xin asked, "What should we do?! Your Highness, can that white silk band of yours reach him?"

Xie Lian had already tried that and was now calling Ruoye back to pat the flames off it. "I can't! He's too far! Ruoye caught fire partway!"

Small tongues of flame were singing Mu Qing's robes, and the hilt of his saber was scorching hot. Yet he still gripped it hard, afraid to let go and afraid to look down.

If he let go, there was nothing but a pool of blazing fire waiting for him below. The countless spirits of the dead wailed, their starving cries echoing all around. It was like they were calling out to the one struggling to hang on for dear life above them, beseeching him to hurry and join their cohort.

Mu Qing held on to the saber’s hilt with a death grip, his pale forehead covered with sweat. When he saw the others in the distance, his mouth moved like he wanted to call for help. But even at a time like this, he was the kind of person who had great difficulty forcing the words *“help”* or *“save me”* past his lips.

Besides, no matter how easy it would be for Hua Cheng to save him, he probably wouldn’t. It was hard to tell with Feng Xin too. Xie Lian was the only one who would be willing to rescue him, had the ability to do so, and could persuade the other two to help.

In the end, Mu Qing pulled himself up with enormous effort to shout to Xie Lian, veins bulging slightly on his forehead as he did. “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian was scanning the area rapidly but looked at him when he heard the call. Mu Qing held back for a good while, then sucked in a breath and yelled with a beet-red face.

“…Believe me! Your Highness, you know I’m not lying, right? You know I wouldn’t have really harmed any of you, right?!”

“…”

The way he spoke to Xie Lian, so full of hope, like he was hanging on to the last thread of his life, made Xie Lian remember another scene from another time. A time many, many years ago, when he begged Mu Qing with the same desperate hope as dusk fell overhead, *“You know I’m not lying, right?”*

How had Mu Qing answered him back then?

He hadn’t thought about that time for centuries, but Mu Qing’s question dragged the memories from the dusty corners where they were sealed away. Countless images and voices broke loose and flashed across his mind. It was only then that Xie Lian realized he remembered every detail incredibly clearly—that he had never forgotten a thing.

Mu Qing didn’t receive an answer. Xie Lian’s unusual silence sent his mind back to the same scene. As he realized that he’d asked for help with the wrong words—and in doing so, reminded Xie Lian of something he shouldn't have at a time like this—the color of his face slowly changed.

From behind Xie Lian, Hua Cheng spoke quietly. "Gege, before you make your decision, I must remind you of a few things."

Xie Lian finally snapped out of it. "What is it?"

"First," Hua Cheng said, "unless the lava stops flowing, rescuing him will mean risking your own life."

But who knew when it would stop? The saber's hilt was already red hot; Mu Qing wouldn't be able to hold it for much longer. How could he possibly hang on until then?

Xie Lian stayed quiet, and Hua Cheng continued. "Second, if Mu Qing has already given himself to Jun Wu, Jun Wu will certainly have a way to extract him from peril. But you, on the other hand—you will definitely be risking your life. And the possibility that he has indeed surrendered is significant; think about the way he acted this entire trip."

Knocking Feng Xin out, luring them into the armory, refusing to admit he attacked Feng Xin and even making accusations back, disappearing without a word after the armory went berserk, the coincidental timing of the lava stream's intrusion—all that had brought them to where they were now.

Was he once again attempting to lead Xie Lian to his demise?

Xie Lian's silence was stretching a bit long. The saber's hilt was burning hot, and Mu Qing let out a loud shout. He dropped one hand and hung for a while using only the other, but didn't dare support himself like that for too long and quickly clutched the hilt with both once again. Wisps of white vapor were smoking from both palms, and while there was quite a distance between them, those on the palace roof could almost smell the stench of burning flesh.

Hua Cheng casually let loose a silver butterfly. The silver butterfly fluttered its wings and flew a few hundred paces, but it dissipated into silver smoke and vanished before it got even a third of the way to Mu Qing. Xie Lian understood he was demonstrating that the wraith butterflies couldn't help—that it was a dead end and not worth dying for.

Mu Qing also saw the silver butterfly vanish, and his expression gradually turned into one of resignation as he understood. No one here could save him, and no one believed him. Thanks to his choice of words triggering unpleasant memories, there was no reason for Xie Lian to help him at the risk of his own life.

Frustration bubbled up at the unfairness of it all. But he refused to give up, even on the brink of despair. Mu Qing gritted his teeth and shouted to them, “If you don’t believe me, that’s fine too. But I will never fall that easily!”

He gripped the hilt hard and attempted a midair spin to stand upon it—yet he had only raised himself a few inches before he sank violently!

Mu Qing’s eyes reflected the countless bloodred vengeful spirits that had merged with the lava below. Their faces and limbs contorted and twisted as they pressed themselves onto his leg and pulled him down!

The vengeful spirits were originally one with the lava, but they popped out without warning, one after another, to hang from his lower body, heavy and boiling hot. It was like adding oil to fire, or frost to snow, and Mu Qing was driven to the verge of madness.

“Get lost!”

It wasn’t like he had never come close to death over the course of centuries, but it had always been when he was heavily wounded in some conflict. A death by drowning in lava was a thousand times more horrifying than death by injury. He imagined himself turning into a wisp of smoke like that wraith butterfly, leaving the world without a trace, and couldn’t stand it.

At last, Mu Qing’s hands reached their limit. His fingers loosened slightly, no longer able to maintain their grip.

The space under the saber emptied—he had fallen! A silhouette plunged downward to the blazing lava pool.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Despite his devastated screams, once he’d plunged for a bit, the drop came to a violent stop. He was suspended in midair!

Head half-numb, Mu Qing hadn't yet regained his senses. His instinctive reactions were still intact though, and he quickly felt his body—to discover that a white silk band had wrapped itself around his waist.

It was Ruoye, of course. But the palace where Xie Lian perched was nowhere near the cliff where Mu Qing fell. If Ruoye couldn't reach earlier, how could it have caught him after he had fallen so far?

Mu Qing gazed upward and discovered with considerable shock that Xie Lian wasn't on the palace roof at all. He was right above his own head.

Earlier, Mu Qing had nailed his long saber into the rocks and managed to hang on to the hilt for some time. And right now, Xie Lian was half crouched upon that very hilt!

Xie Lian was rapidly reeling Ruoye in, and he only breathed in relief when he saw Mu Qing was all right. "Thank goodness, thank goodness, I made it in time."

"Your…Your Highness?" Mu Qing muttered.

The events of the last few seconds had been too much for his frazzled brain to sort out, leaving him deeply confused. The roof was so far from the cliff's edge, with no landing points en route within the rolling lava. Xie Lian could've only jumped halfway at most. How had he gotten here?

In the distance, Feng Xin's voice rang out. "Your Highness! Are you both all right?"

When Mu Qing glanced in his direction, he saw Hua Cheng and Feng Xin standing atop the palace roof. Hua Cheng was watching them with his arms crossed, focused solely on ensuring Xie Lian's safety and indifferent to anything else. At the midpoint between the palace and the cliff where he fell, a frigid, ink-black longsword stood upright in the incessant flow of red-hot lava.

Fangxin!

So that was it! Mu Qing finally understood how Xie Lian had made the crossing.

At most, Xie Lian could only make half the needed jump—he'd never be able to make it all the way from the safety of the palace rooftop to rescue him from the cliff. Thus, Xie Lian had hurled out Fangxin and nailed it into the lava stream to create a landing point. Using Fangxin as a stepping stone, he then leapt onto Mu Qing's saber and just barely caught him with Ruoye at the last second.

"I was trying to think of a way over. It took some time, since there was nothing helpful lying around," Xie Lian said. "You were also panicking. Don't lose your head, otherwise you'll only fall faster."

Mu Qing had thought Xie Lian's silence was him hesitating on whether to save him, but it turned out that Xie Lian was just trying to think of *how* to save him—and thank goodness that he'd kept such a clear head in such a dire situation.

The beads of sweat on Mu Qing's forehead rolled thicker as he looked up and saw that Xie Lian had reached down for him, a broad smile on his face.

"In any case, I know it's a bit overdue, but I'm not extending a hand *too* late, right?"

"…"

Perhaps it was because he'd been gripping the saber hilt for too long, but Mu Qing's arms felt impossibly heavy. He couldn't raise them an inch.

Xie Lian stretched his hand lower. "Come."

Mu Qing finally took hold. His entire arm trembled, but Xie Lian yanked forcefully and pulled him up. The pair stood together on the hilt of Mu Qing's long saber, and Xie Lian turned around to wave at the palace roof.

"San Lang, it worked!"

"Very good, gege," Hua Cheng replied. "Now come back right this instant!"

"Okay, I'll be right over!" Xie Lian responded and then said to Mu Qing, "Can you still jump? If not, I can take you."

Mu Qing's lips moved. "I…"

Xie Lian studied his expression and said decisively, "I'll take you."

He grabbed him by the scruff of his robes. In the past, Mu Qing probably would've rolled his eyes and protested Xie Lian's manhandling, griping about the disrespect. But now, Mu Qing couldn’t muster a single word.

Xie Lian was just about to leap when they both unexpectedly felt their feet dip. As if things weren’t bad enough, the long saber driven into the rocks just had to pick that exact time to come loose!

Hua Cheng’s face changed color. “Gege!”

This time, two figures plunged together toward the crimson-red lava pool.

Xie Lian could still think fast in that sort of ass-to-the-fire moment. He shouted, “It’s fine!”

He spun several times in midair and caught the long saber by the hilt with both hands, then wedged it into the rocks once more!

Clang! Sparks flew, brilliant and dazzling like grains of gold flecked across Xie Lian’s protective aura of spiritual light. Without that aura, even a speck of those flames could burn a large hole in someone!

Ruoye pulled Mu Qing up, and Xie Lian said to him solemnly, “This saber won’t be able to take the weight of two grown men for long. This can’t continue. Between the two of us, only one can remain.”

Mu Qing slowly came back to his senses. “Are you saying…?”

“You can go,” Xie Lian said.

“…?”

Flummoxed, Mu Qing’s pupils shrank. Before he could speak, Xie Lian grabbed him and hurled him upward with a shout.

“Watch your landing!”

Mu Qing was thrown away from the cliff and quickly found that he was flying toward where Fangxin stood. Pulling himself together, he flipped in the air and landed on the hilt of the sword.

Only then did he understand why Xie Lian had to throw him.

Perhaps Xie Lian could make the long jump from the saber hilt from its new position several dozen paces down. But *he* couldn’t make a jump that long. The only way he was going to make it that far was with the help of Xie Lian’s mighty throw!

Feng Xin wiped away his cold sweat. “Thank goodness Your Highness reacts fast!”

Hua Cheng, however, still wore a severe expression. “Gege! If you don’t come back soon, I’m going to have to come and get you!” he called down below.

His voice carried a note of warning, and Xie Lian hurried to reply, “I’m coming back up now! Everything’s fine—I can handle it. I can jump back myself! Don’t come down here.”

Only then did Hua Cheng’s demeanor relax a little, though he still watched Xie Lian with an unblinking gaze.

Feng Xin glanced at him and couldn’t help but say, “…I’m a little surprised.”

“What?” Hua Cheng replied, not turning or showing a single trace of curiosity.

Feng Xin scratched his head. “Since you’re so biased against Mu Qing, I assumed you’d think he wasn’t worth saving and wouldn’t want His Highness rescuing him. I thought you’d prevent him from going.”

Only then did Hua Cheng spare him a glance. “Half-wrong, half-right.”

“Huh?”

“The first part isn’t wrong—I certainly don’t think he’s worth saving,” Hua Cheng said. “I don’t care if he lives or dies.”

“Isn’t that a little too blunt?!” Seeing that apathetic expression made Feng Xin start to sweat; when he realized that this man definitely held the same attitude toward him, he sweat even harder!

Hua Cheng snorted, then after a pause, he added, “But only His Highness can decide what he wants to do. I will never oppose his decisions.”

“…”

Feng Xin had never heard anyone say something like that before—not a man to a woman, and most definitely not one man to another. But he was quite sure that Xie Lian would only get all worked up and flustered again if he'd been here to hear it.

"Ah… I see," Feng Xin said, not knowing what face to make.

Hua Cheng turned back to stare at Xie Lian, who was studying the fiery lava flow all around and formulating his plan, and gave a smile. "Besides, I already knew he was going to do this."

On the other side, Xie Lian called out, "Mu Qing, hurry and move to the rooftop. And don't run away again; we can talk out our problems properly later."

Only then did Mu Qing realize that if he didn't leave Fangxin, Xie Lian would have nowhere to land for his next step. Forcing himself to think calmly, Mu Qing was just about to leap to the rooftop when Xie Lian cried out from below.

"Who's there?!"

As Xie Lian stood on the saber, silently storing energy, the lavafall behind him had suddenly parted. A pair of hands stretched out from the other side of the falls and quickly seized him. The creature had clearly come from within the lava flow, but its hands were frighteningly cold and Xie Lian shuddered at their touch.

He heard Hua Cheng exclaim from above, "Your Highness?!"

The owner of the hands hugged Xie Lian tightly, then threw them both off the saber. Xie Lian was shocked, but those above saw very clearly what had seized him from behind.

It was a man clad in white robes who wore a half-crying, half-smiling mask—as if he was rejoicing, as if he was grieving.

White No-Face!

Sensing danger, Ruoye whipped out on its own, flinging itself upward and casting itself before Mu Qing. Mu Qing grabbed it reflexively, but the power holding the other end was too great. Not only couldn't he reel it in, it yanked him down with it too.

As he plunged amidst the wild, fiery sparks, Xie Lian heard the creature laughing into his ear.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha… Naive! Too naive, Xianle! Did you really think it would be that easy to achieve a perfect happy ending?”

Scorching waves of heat came from below, but his mind shivered with deadly cold. Awash in conflicting ice and fire, Xie Lian caught a glimpse of the domed ceiling, glowing with firelight. He could vaguely see a shape in silhouette—a red figure, approaching rapidly.

Hua Cheng had jumped down too!

But wait—the lava pool was right below!

Chapter 127:
Upon the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, Three Idiots Return to Olden Times

XIE LIAN WAS DROWNING—perhaps in mind-blowing fear or perhaps in the scorching-hot lava.

It was a long time before he slowly came to.

The moment he woke, he found he was lying on cold, solid ground. Mu Qing was slumped nearby, staring blankly at him.

Xie Lian's vision was still faintly red, and he sat up in a flash. "San Lang!"

The moment he sat up, Mu Qing snapped out of it and yelled, "Stay still!"

On reflex, Xie Lian reached out to push himself off the ground, but his hand touched nothing but air; he lost his balance and almost toppled. Only after the surprise wore off did he realize he wasn't on solid ground at all.

He was lying on a bridge!

He'd found himself in an immense natural cave. Its dome arched into the vast night sky, and a desecrated bridge floated beneath the canopy.

Constructed from wood and stone, the bridge's body was shattered and scorched a terrifying pitch-black. It had weathered thousands of years of storms and was burdened with ashes from countless blazes. It hung in midair without any pillars of support, and both ends stretched endlessly into infinity—its beginning unknown, its end unforeseeable, and its direction a mystery. In some parts it was as wide as nine meters, but others were so narrow that only one person could cross at a time.

A red-hot lava pool roiled hundreds of meters beneath the broken bridge, like the red basin of hell.

The Heaven-Crossing Bridge?

Those words were the first to pop into Xie Lian's mind. Two thousand years ago, the Crown Prince of Wuyong built a bridge to the heavens in an attempt to save his people from disaster. Could this bridge be all that remained?

He remembered being yanked into the lava by White No-Face. How had he ended up on this bridge?

Xie Lian crawled to his feet. "San Lang?"

"Don't bother, he's not here," Mu Qing said. He remained seated to the side.

Xie Lian turned to him. "How did we end up here? Did someone activate a Teleportation Array?"

"Probably," Mu Qing said. "I was falling straight for the lava pool, but I was sent here halfway down."

Poor Feng Xin. All three of them had fallen, and he was the only one who'd stayed up top. He was probably cursing up a storm again. Still, finding Hua Cheng was the priority—where had he been sent?

Xie Lian spotted Fangxin and the long saber that had been tossed to the side. He picked them up, then walked to Mu Qing. The way he approached, holding a sword and wearing a dark expression, suddenly made Mu Qing nervous, unsure of what he was planning to do.

However, Xie Lian only gave him his saber, then extended a hand to him. "Are you all right? If you're fine, then get up. We have to get going."

Mu Qing stared at the hand extended to him. After a long silence, he shook his head. "I can't. All my limbs are injured."

Xie Lian crouched and briefly checked him over. Sure enough, both of Mu Qing's hands were covered in bright red burns, and there were more on his legs. He could probably only shuffle along slowly.

After a moment of contemplation, Xie Lian said, "Let me assist you, then."

He pulled Mu Qing up and slung his arm over his shoulders. He began to walk, supporting him as he went.

They had only taken a few steps when Mu Qing blurted, "Why?"

"Why what?" Xie Lian replied as he surveyed their surroundings.

"I thought you'd be more suspicious of me after you found out that I was fine," Mu Qing said.

"Oh," Xie Lian replied. "Well, no."

"Why?"

"Because I know."

"Know what?"

"That you weren't lying," Xie Lian replied.

"…"

It was genuinely difficult to describe the expression on Mu Qing's face. "…"

"Didn't you ask me to believe you? I believe you. That's it," Xie Lian said, quite matter-of-factly.

"…"

"How should I put this…?" Xie Lian continued. "I've technically known you for centuries, right? So I know you're not like that. Haven't I said it before? You might spit in someone's cup, but you'd never dump poison in there."

Mu Qing was almost touched by the first part, but his face turned dark when he heard the second half.

"Enough with the unnecessary example! Seriously, don't say that again. I wouldn't spit either! I'd never be so *classless*!"

Xie Lian waved. "Don't mind the little details. Besides, even on the one-in-a-million chance that I was unlucky enough to misjudge you, you can't beat me and San Lang. We'd slap you dead in one blow; you're not a threat at all. Ha ha ha…"

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" Mu Qing grumbled. "You're trying very hard to make me so pissed off I die…"

"*Ahem*, I'm joking. In any case…" Xie Lian stopped laughing and clutched Mu Qing's arm as he scanned the path forward. "If Jun Wu really did bind you with a cursed shackle because you refused to do something evil, then I can't let you pay a terrible price for it," he stated calmly. "Because you did the right thing."

Mu Qing glared at him for a long time. At last, he spat through his teeth, "Xie Lian, you really are—"

"Save it," Xie Lian interrupted before he could continue. "Do you think I don't know what you think of me? You're still depending on me to carry you right now, so don't say anything that'll make me want to toss you into the lava."

Mu Qing humphed. "And here you are, saving me even though you know what I think of you."

"You know, we think the same way. By saving you, I'm just following my own principles. That's it," Xie Lian replied. "Your actions have always been mystifying to me, and I definitely wanted to punch you to death for a while back then. But I didn't manage to do it, and at this point, I've lost interest. No matter how incomprehensible you are, and no matter how much I want to punch you, your sins don't warrant death, you know? If I can save you, of course I'll do it if I can."

Mu Qing snorted a few times like he was deflating. After a moment of quiet, he added, "Your Highness, I actually—"

Just then, the ground under them grew unsteady, and their faces changed color.

Mu Qing was wounded and couldn't react in time, but fortunately Xie Lian moved with godly speed. He pushed off with the tips of his toes, and they landed lightly ten meters ahead. Behind them, the section of the bridge they had just been walking on cracked, broke away, and began falling straight down into the lava.

Rrrumble!

A section of the pitch-black bridge crashed into the hellish scarlet basin. The vengeful spirits roiling in the pool had been waiting for a long time, and they quickly reached for it. Hundreds of pairs of hands fought to grab on, as if they wanted to use it to escape from the sea of suffering, but there were too many of them. The stretch of broken bridge couldn't support all of them, and it sank quickly. The two above watched, shaking, then they exchanged a look.

“It seems this bridge isn’t very stable!” Xie Lian commented.

Mu Qing opened and closed his mouth. He’d probably planned to say that they might as well turn back—the area of the bridge they had been lying on before was quite stable and spacious. But there was no way back now that the stretch behind them had collapsed, and retreat was no longer an option. The only way for them was forward, but the narrowing path ahead was treacherous; danger hid all around them. Each step they took could potentially send them falling into the lava!

Without another word, Xie Lian hoisted Mu Qing onto his back. “We can’t stay in the same spot for too long. Who knows when this thing will collapse. Hold on tight, I’m going to dash through!”

As promised, Xie Lian leapt forward with flying steps. The farther they traveled, the more suffocatingly tight their footpath along the bridge became—even the most substantial areas were not much wider than a doorway, and the narrowest areas no wider than a person’s waist!

Even in such a perilous situation, not a hair on Xie Lian’s head was ruffled during his flight. His featherlight feet pushed off the moment they made contact with the ground beneath him, like a swallow skimming the water’s surface. Had there been other martial gods present, they would have been stunned by the brilliant and frightening level of control he had over his movement, even down to his very footsteps; none of them could possibly compare. Only one who trained vigorously without spiritual powers, day in and day out, could boast such masterful skill!

A pillar of fire erupted before him without warning, blocking Xie Lian’s path forward. Only his incredible reflexes allowed him to brake in time; they were a hair’s breadth from charging right into the fire and being burnt to a crisp. They looked down and realized that thousands of vengeful spirits the color of molten rock had gathered in the pool below. The spirits screeched and cackled as they reached toward them. These were the ones responsible for the pillar of fire.

Their ears were beginning to ache from the noise. “What are they screaming about?” Mu Qing wondered.

“‘Come down, join us, rot to death here!’” Xie Lian mumbled.

Mu Qing stared at him, terrified. “You understand them? Aren’t they speaking in the Wuyong tongue?”

Xie Lian nodded. “Mmm, they’re…the people of Wuyong who fell into the lava and burned to death after the Heaven-Crossing Bridge collapsed. Careful not to get tangled up with them; they’ll pull everything they see into the pool. Just as I suspected—these are the remains of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge!”

“Will they be absolved if they pull people in?” Mu Qing questioned.

“No,” Xie Lian replied. “That won’t happen, no matter what they do. These vengeful spirits will never receive absolution, but they enjoy seeing others suffer their fate.”

And that was precisely *why* they would never receive absolution and had to suffer the torment of this basin of hell.

Mu Qing was puzzled. “How do you know so much?”

“I don’t know,” Xie Lian said. “But…*he* was probably the one who told me.”

The same as how he’d transplanted the memories that let Xie Lian understand the screeching of the corpse-eating rats.

The molten vengeful spirits were quite displeased that they still hadn’t fallen, and they crept together to whisper amongst themselves. Suddenly, they all joined hands, ready to make their next attack. Xie Lian broke out into a run. A pillar of fire burst forth, and the already-damaged bridge was devastated even further.

They couldn’t just keep taking a beating without retaliating. Xie Lian tried sending a blast down below, but he didn’t have much spiritual power left and couldn’t shoot very far. Mu Qing’s spiritual power reserves had more in them and could travel farther, but he still came up just slightly short. The pillars of fire from below kept almost burning their ankles. The enormous crowd of vengeful spirits had banded together, and their energy was immense when consolidated. They cackled and pointed at the two with great excitement, as if they were watching a highly entertaining show. It was incredibly vexing that they couldn’t attack them at all! Mu Qing, still on Xie Lian’s back, cracked his knuckles. He radiated hate and fury.

A moment later, Mu Qing gritted his teeth and panted a few breaths. He'd clearly found the resolve to make a very difficult decision.

"Forget it, Your Highness… Xie Lian, put me down!"

"What are you saying?! You love your life and you're terrified of death!" Xie Lian replied as he dashed along. "You'd never say something like that!"

Veins bulged violently on Mu Qing's forehead. "Well, sorry for loving my life and being terrified of death! But I'm going to die either way… So put me down before I change my mind!"

"Stop joking around. Don't talk anymore; you'll make me lose focus," Xie Lian said. "What matters right now is finding the end of this bridge as soon as possible."

"Who's joking around?!" Mu Qing exclaimed. "If this really is the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, who the hell knows how much longer you'll have to run? They'll throw us off sooner or later. Put me down and go on ahead; I'll kill all that slippery trash down there!"

Then he lightly pushed off Xie Lian's shoulder and leapt away, landing behind him. Xie Lian turned and took a step toward him, but Mu Qing warned him otherwise.

"Don't come back here; the path is narrow. We'll both fall if you do!"

Xie Lian had no choice but to pause. Mu Qing humphed again.

"You know, we *do* think the same way. You think I'm incomprehensible? Well, the feeling's mutual." He met Xie Lian's gaze. "At this point, I might as well just tell it to you straight. I've got a whole bunch of opinions about you."

"Uh…well…I knew that already. For ages now," Xie Lian said.

"Oh really?" Mu Qing said coldly. "Then do you know that I often thought you relied on your status too much—that even though you were His Highness the Crown Prince, even though you had good fortune, your skills weren't that much better than mine?"

"…"

"I also thought that you probably only liked doing all those good deeds for show, because you wanted all the praise and flattery. And that you only helped me because of that—I was the perfect subject for you to demonstrate your sympathy and kindness on. To be honest, some of my opinions haven't changed, even now. Maybe they never will. Even if I push these thoughts down, they'll come back eventually."

At that point, Xie Lian didn't know whether to sweat about this or what. "There's no need to say stuff like that in such detail to the man himself, you know?!"

Unexpectedly, Mu Qing continued with, "But more often than not, I'm still…kind of in awe of you."

Xie Lian was taken aback.

Mu Qing gathered his courage. As though someone were choking him, forcing him to speak, he stiffly said, "Isn't that normal? You…are rather amazing. You're…also…a better person than I am. In short, I…very much wanted…to become your f-f-friend."

"…"

Xie Lian had never in a million years imagined he'd ever hear that from Mu Qing's lips. Though they were stuttered, forced, and stiff, they were such honest, sincere, sensible words! His eyes went wide.

"You…"

Mu Qing had finally squeezed the sentence out through the cracks of his gritted teeth, and he let out a long breath. "That incident after Xianle's fall…no matter if it was right or wrong, no matter if I was in a difficult situation, I still owe you an apology."

Xie Lian was stumped for a moment. "…It's all water under the bridge, so let it go. But let's not worry about it now. We need to get out of here first!"

Mu Qing raised his voice. "He told me that if I fell under suspicion, you would take advantage of the situation and not save me even if you knew I didn't do it. That you wouldn't believe me because you hate me."

"He"? Xie Lian knew exactly who "he" was.

“I didn’t agree to help him, but even so…everything he said, I’ve thought before,” Mu Qing continued. “Deep down, I always thought you hated me, that you despised me, so I… I’ve always… Anyway, you don’t actually think that way. I’m glad.”

Another pillar of fire roared to the skies, and Xie Lian backed away a few steps to dodge it, moving farther from Mu Qing. As for Mu Qing, his rage surged and he flung himself down, slapping his palm violently on the bridge’s surface.

Xie Lian’s pupils shrank. “What are you doing?!”

As expected, the stretch of the bridge caved in and crashed down, taking Mu Qing along with it. “Helping you clear out the trash!” Mu Qing shouted to him in midair.

The broken bridge slammed into the pool and stirred a surge of towering waves. The molten vengeful spirits swarmed over happily, ready to drag him in with them. Yet unexpectedly, a booming blast swept past and dissipated a large field of them. Amidst the wailing of ghosts, Mu Qing stood at the center of the broken bridge and sneered. The spiritual light enveloping him blazed brightly.

“Did it feel good to start those devious fires, you gang of gutter trash? Well, I’ve finally come down here, so don’t run away now!”

Now his blasts could finally reach those molten vengeful spirits!

Mu Qing raised his bloodred palms and swept wildly at the vengeful spirits, killing to his heart’s content. He was so forceful that the vengeful spirits who had been watching the show from further downstream scattered, screaming as they swam away in all directions.

Fire had started to catch on Mu Qing’s sleeves and hems. Xie Lian hung over the bridge’s edge above and called to him, “Mu Qing?! How high can you jump?”

“Why do you have so much garbage to say?! Why haven’t you left?!” Mu Qing shouted.

“It’s not my fault,” Xie Lian argued back. “You finally said something sensible for the first time in your life, and then you jumped off! How could I leave now?!”

Mu Qing was outraged. “What do you mean, ‘finally said something sensible—’”

Before he could finish, the broken piece of bridge under his feet sank a few notches. Both their faces changed. At this rate, he really was going to be engulfed by the lava, his bones dissolving into nothing but air!

Mu Qing’s face was a ghastly shade now, despite his previous high spirits. He closed his eyes and raised his palms, as if he planned to seek a more straightforward death by smashing through his own skull before he burned alive.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, don’t be rash! I-I-I-I’ve got a plan!” Xie Lian hastily cried.

Mu Qing opened his eyes again. “What plan?”

Although Ruoye couldn’t reach the very bottom, it could make it halfway. “Jump with everything you’ve got!” Xie Lian shouted as he tossed Ruoye down. “Jump and catch it! I’ll pull you up!”

Mu Qing’s face paled by another shade. “If I could jump, would I need to think of another way out?!” He went back to trying to muster the courage to smack himself dead.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “Really, wait! I’ll think of something soon!”

“Well, out with it, then!”

Something. *Something*. Quick, think of something!

…He had nothing!

Mu Qing raised his hand again. Yet unexpectedly, amidst their spiraling despair, another hand slapped away his suicidal fist, then grabbed him bodily. With a dazed Mu Qing dangling in his hold, the man leapt!

Suddenly, Xie Lian felt the other end of the white silk band tighten, and he was both surprised and overjoyed to see why.

“Feng Xin?!”

The broken bridge piece on which Mu Qing had stood sank completely into the depths of the lava stream, bubbling as it did. Feng Xin dangled from Ruoye, gripping it with one hand while the other held an ashen-faced Mu Qing.

“Your Highness, quick, pull us up!” Feng Xin yelled at Xie Lian.

There were more empty-shelled people paddling in the lava—Feng Xin had likely ridden them here from upstream. There was no time to ask questions, and Xie Lian hurried over to a section of the bridge that was somewhat wider and sturdier before pulling them up. As the two were steadily lifted, a new band of molten vengeful spirits gathered beneath them, shooting resentful glares upward and grumbling in their huddle. Soon, another pillar of fire shot up!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were hanging in midair and couldn’t dodge on their own, so Xie Lian gripped Ruoye and hurried several steps away to evade the attack. But there wasn’t anywhere else on the bridge as spacious or stable, so after dodging the blow he could only return to where he’d been.

Feng Xin was almost burned by that pillar of fire, and he shouted in outrage. “What’s wrong with you, you pieces of dog shit?! Attacking people while they’re down—so vile! Fuck your entire family!”

“You sure you want to fuck their families if they all look like that?!” Xie Lian responded.

The vengeful spirits hadn’t given up. Giggling, they appeared ready to continue their ambush. Feng Xin’s temper had peaked, and he pulled Mu Qing up.

“Hold on to this!”

Mu Qing numbly did as he was told and grasped the white silk band. His reaction was a little dull because the shock was just too great—he had truly thought he was about to die. Without the need to hold him, Feng Xin could free up a hand to retrieve the longbow on his back as well as several wooden sticks he’d picked up along the way. Using the sticks as arrows, he held the bow in one hand and used his teeth to bite back the bowstring. He nocked the sticks, pulled the bowstring back steadily, and let fly four arrows at once! *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*.

The arrows plunged into the fiery pool, and where they struck, blossoms of waves erupted. The molten vengeful spirits tumbled over themselves in terror and scattered once again. Gratified at last, Feng Xin cussed.

“See that?! I *said* I’d fuck you up! Fucking pieces of dog shit! This ancestor can blow all of you away with one hand!”

At last, the three stood together upon the Heaven-Crossing Bridge.

Xie Lian wiped at his sweat over and over. His heart was still pounding. “Feng Xin, how did you get here?”

At that question, Feng Xin immediately clutched his head. “How did I get here? All three of you jumped in; what else was I supposed to do? I almost went fucking crazy! I found my way to the bottom of the cliff, then drifted all the way here. I only stumbled on you two because I followed all the rumbling and shouting. What were you doing, jumping into the lava pool?! Madness!”

Mu Qing, who had finally come to his senses, exclaimed, “I was *dragged* in!”

Imagining Feng Xin in distress and cursing the whole way here, Xie Lian thought it best to say, “All right, all right, all right, calm down. All that aside, you were an absolute godsend—a major help! You know what they say: sometimes, people really…really need a helping hand to get by. Really!”

All three had been scared half to death. They gasped for breath, their faces ashen. But after sorting themselves out and pulling through that mess, they didn’t dare stick around. Feng Xin hoisted Mu Qing onto his back, and they continued leaping along the Heaven-Crossing Bridge. As they went, they exchanged what they knew, and Xie Lian learned that Feng Xin hadn’t seen Hua Cheng either. He couldn’t help but worry. Where was Hua Cheng? They would have to search along the bridge as they went.

“By the way, I overheard a little of what you were screaming about earlier,” Feng Xin said to Mu Qing, who was on his back. “The first bit was infuriating—it made me want to beat you up. But I never imagined you actually thought all that deep down, you little bastard!”

“…”

Mu Qing’s expression had gone completely dark. Feng Xin turned to Xie Lian.

“Didn’t I tell you? This guy’s feelings are more twisted than a resentful concubine’s in the depths of a harem—he’s completely unfathomable!”

“…”

Seeing the stormy look on Mu Qing’s face, Xie Lian gestured for Feng Xin to stop. Feng Xin was entirely oblivious, though, and turned to Mu Qing to continue.

“If you wanted to be friends with His Highness, then you should’ve just said so! I really don’t know what you were thinking, going around making people sick with all that sarcasm just because you thought His Highness despised you so much that you couldn’t be friends.”

Xie Lian gave up and waved dismissively. “He’s been like that since we were young, hasn’t he? Don’t scold him anymore. Look, his face is all red.”

“…”

Unable to bear it a moment longer, Mu Qing yelled, “What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?! Can’t you two just shut up?!”

“You seem to have caught Feng Xin’s vocabulary. It’s not very polite to swear,” Xie Lian reminded him.

Feng Xin piped up. “You said it yourself—you very much wanted to be His Highness’s f-f-friend!”

He even purposely imitated Mu Qing’s teeth-gritted stutter.

Mu Qing’s expression had gone savage, and his hand had crept behind his back to seek his saber.

“All right, now we’ve cleared the air. Anyway, just remember this: His Highness never thought you were beneath him,” Feng Xin added. “Other than that time you crossed the line and he got mad, he’s never said a single bad word about you in front of me! So just act like a normal person from now on—talk normally, express yourself normally. I’m gonna yell at you if you get sarcastic again!”

Mu Qing hung his head and quietly listened to the first part, but the latter half had him rolling his eyes. “Haven’t you yelled at me for centuries at this point?”

“Mu Qing, you’re a heavenly official. You have to pay attention to your image, all right?” Xie Lian reminded him. “You can’t roll your eyes so often; your devotees will object if they see.”

“Please,” Mu Qing said. “This guy swears all day in the Upper Court.”

Feng Xin humphed. “That’s because you deserve it.”

“Stop bringing up old quarrels with me,” Mu Qing said. “Didn’t you also ditch His Highness to go sire a son?”

Veins were popping on Feng Xin’s forehead too now, and he rolled up his sleeves. “You trying to start a fight?”

Mu Qing sneered. “Fight yourself. If you didn’t shit-talk me to His Highness all day, do you think I would’ve been so convinced that he looked down on me and got all weird about it?”

They’d devolved into that vicious cycle of arguments again, and Xie Lian spoke up.

“Will you two stop airing each other’s dirty laundry at a time like this? What’s the point of hurting each other…?”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes again and scoffed. “Besides, you freaked out so badly back then—so what if he robbed someone? If I were His Highness, at that point I would’ve already robbed eighteen wealthy, prominent households without batting an eye. You’re the one who made such a big deal out of it by relentlessly demanding an explanation from His Highness.”

Sweating over all this back-and-forth, Xie Lian glanced over his shoulder. “Wait a sec, there’s no need to air mine either! Anyway… San Lang! Help me find San Lang! Ha ha ha ha…”

Chapter 128:
Bloody Rain Sought Flower, Vicious Battle Against White No-Face

AT THAT MOMENT, all three felt a wave of heat surge from below. They all cried, *"Watch out!"* and their feet moved faster as seven or eight pillars of fire shot to the skies. Even more of the molten vengeful spirits had gathered below!

"Feng Xin, give Mu Qing to me!" Xie Lian called out.

Without another word, Feng Xin peeled Mu Qing off his back and tossed him to Xie Lian. Once on Xie Lian's back, Mu Qing exclaimed, "Finish them off quickly! What a nuisance!"

"I don't need you to tell me that!" Feng Xin replied as he pulled his bowstring to ready multiple arrows at once.

His bow attacks could hit a much wider area than the spiritual blasts that he and Xie Lian had been firing off wildly. The arrows made explosive impact with the lava, sending waves surging high into the air and eliciting screams from all around.

"Nice work!" Xie Lian complimented.

"It's all right, I guess!" Mu Qing commented from his back.

The vengeful spirits were full of rancor, and after another huddle, they swam farther ahead and worked together to blow flames at them.

After a series of rumbles, Xie Lian said, "They've burnt through a stretch of the bridge ahead. They want to cut off our path!"

"Fucking hell," Feng Xin cursed. "You're all teaming up, working so hard! Why do you have to hurt people?! The way I see it, none of you are ever leaving that lava, not for another eight thousand years!"

The moment he raised his bow, the molten vengeful spirits scattered again.

"All right, stop yelling and get ready!" Xie Lian said. "We're gonna jump! One, two, three—!"

On one, they began to speed up. On two, they calculated the number of steps remaining. On three, their feet pushed off and they jumped. Three figures leapt into the air, passed over the gap in the broken bridge, and then landed on the other side before continuing their mad dash.

The bridge had been created as a path to the heavens, so, naturally, it sloped gradually upward. However, the more they ran, the lighter Xie Lian felt—light as a swallow.

"It's been a long time since the three of us did something like this, huh?"

"Do you mean fighting side by side or running for our lives?" Mu Qing questioned.

"Both!" Xie Lian said.

"We do this all the time!" Feng Xin exclaimed.

"Really?" Xie Lian wondered.

Well, one's state of mind obviously changed completely once they cleared the air.

Xie Lian let out a laugh, but his careful eyes never stopped scanning below them. There was still no sight of a red silhouette, so he couldn't help but be a little on edge.

"San Lang!"

His call echoed in the expansive, empty underground cave, but no one answered. Xie Lian licked his dry lips.

He scanned the room, eyes darting this way and that, and Mu Qing was silent for a moment as he watched from his perch on Xie Lian's back.

"Your Highness, you really like him, huh?"

"…" Xie Lian hadn't expected him to ask that out of nowhere. "Ah. Ah? …Ah."

Although his expression was completely blank, the tips of his ears were gradually turning red. Seeing him like this, Mu Qing couldn't think of what to say, so after a moment of hesitation, he plowed ahead.

"I'm not trying to scare you on purpose or anything, but I have to remind you…have you considered…maybe we were the only two sent to the bridge, and Crimson Rain Sought Flower…wasn't?"

"Duh? Of course he was sent elsewhere, since there's only the two of you here…" Feng Xin responded, but he trailed off once he realized what Mu Qing was trying to say.

Rather than saying Hua Cheng had been sent elsewhere, he was saying…that Hua Cheng might have fallen into the lava.

Xie Lian licked his lips again. "H-how could that be?"

"Don't say it's impossible," Mu Qing said. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower is a Supreme Ghost King, no doubt about that, but White No-Face is too. He's from the first generation of Supreme Ghost Kings, and he's the master of Mount Tonglu. This place is his territory, the domain where his spiritual powers are strongest."

Feng Xin glared furiously at Mu Qing. "Shut your mouth! What's wrong with you—can't you say something positive at a time like this?" he scolded. "He's *the* Crimson Rain Sought Flower, I'm telling you!"

Mu Qing stopped, but he couldn't resist countering Feng Xin's statement. "I just think we have to consider what to do in the worst-case scenario."

That offending roll of a one, the single dot so unusually, vividly red and stark against Hua Cheng's pale palm, surfaced in Xie Lian's mind. He didn't know how to respond, but just as he was going to try, he came to an abrupt stop. Feng Xin was following right behind and almost collided with him.

"What is it?!"

As soon as he asked, he realized there was no need.

Ahead of them, millions of shimmering silver sparkles clouded the air, twinkling like stars. It was as if someone had toppled a jewelry box full of silver powder.

Xie Lian put Mu Qing down and walked forward. Reaching out a hand, he gently touched a gleaming piece of silver that was slightly larger than the rest. Upon making contact, he closed his palm and slowly brought it before his eyes.

The other two approached to inspect it as well, and Feng Xin muttered, “This…this is…”

“It’s a fragment of…a wraith butterfly?” Mu Qing said simply.

The overly blunt observation earned him another scornful glare from Feng Xin. Xie Lian’s hand trembled a little. He let out a long breath as he clutched the silver wing fragment, still glowing faintly.

Feng Xin scratched his head. “Look on the bright side: at least he didn’t actually fall into the lava. He must’ve been here, right?”

“And fought with someone,” Mu Qing said, pointing to one side. “A serious fight.”

Xie Lian’s eyes followed his gesture, then went wide. All the rocks around them were covered with countless terrifying gashes made by a sharp blade—the distinctive blade marks of Eming.

Each strike from that scimitar sliced straight to the bone. It wasn’t as though Xie Lian had never seen Hua Cheng use his blade before, but his style had always been relaxed and easy, nonchalant and casual, less handling a weapon than toying with a pocket knife. But these blade marks were from strikes fueled by killing intent—it was easy to imagine the enormous skill level of his opponent and how perilous their battle had been.

Without saying a word, Xie Lian fell to the ground to check. There was no trace that anyone had fallen from the bridge, nor were there any vengeful spirits gathered below it in celebration. Xie Lian finally relaxed a little and got to his feet, then quietly sprinted forward resolutely on his own.

Behind him, Feng Xin hoisted Mu Qing onto his back and went after him. “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian didn’t want to hear his own harsh, anxious breathing, so he held his breath. Disrupting one’s airflow was a great taboo for a martial artist—not only did it add an unnecessary burden to the body, it also disrupted the rhythm of the heart. But even holding his breath was useless; his hands, arms, and legs were shaking. As he ran and ran, he tripped, fell, and tumbled, rolled a dozen times, even nearly careened off the bridge. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both yelled at him to be careful.

Suddenly, Xie Lian came to a halt and looked back.

“What’s that sound?” he asked. “Do you guys hear it? Is that the sound of battle?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both cried, “Yes! And *yes*!”

They could hear the cracking and rumbling of weapons clashing and spiritual powers colliding. Even the Heaven-Crossing Bridge shook faintly. Lights flashed from within the darkness of the path ahead.

Someone was fighting up there! Xie Lian rushed forward, half crawling and half stumbling.

Behind him, Feng Xin muttered, “Fucking hell, may all the gods and buddhas grant their blessings—that’d better be Crimson Rain Sought Flower, otherwise he’s gonna lose it!”

“Stop with that rubbish,” Mu Qing berated. “*We’re* the gods and buddhas, and we can’t grant shit. Just keep up with him! Look at how he’s stumbling; he’s gonna trip and fall flat on his damned face before he even sees the man!”

Xie Lian had completely forgotten about holding his breath, and his own disorderly panting echoed in his ears as he ran on and on. After many twists and turns, he at last rounded the final corner and bright white light filled his vision.

At the end of the suspended Heaven-Crossing Bridge, a man in red and a man in white were engaged in a vicious battle.

The red-clad man wielded a long, slender silver scimitar, and his form was spectral as he flashed in and away like lightning. It was Hua Cheng, and he wasn’t smiling anymore—he was completely focused, his expression sharp. There was a smear of blood on his pale, handsome cheek, adding a splash of vivid color to his biting frost.

The white-clad man was, of course, White No-Face. He was wielding a sword that he had collected from somewhere, and his face was still hidden behind a half-smiling, half-crying mask. However, that mask was a little bit different from the one Xie Lian had seen before.

It was cracked in the middle.

The crack was significant, impossible to ignore—it went from the center of the forehead all the way down to the cheek just below the eye. The mask looked like it could shatter at any moment!

The aura of evil seethed all around. Both combatants were astoundingly light on their feet, deftly bounding off and leaping forward in an instant. And yet each strike still carried a thousand tons of weight, the force of their blows blasting to the skies above—the qi of the sword flew wildly, the gale of the scimitar danced maniacally. Wraith butterflies faced off against the molten vengeful spirits below, both sides shrieking at one another with enough force to collapse mountains and overturn seas. Each time they clashed, molten lava and blazing fire exploded within the pool, sending terrifying waves surging meters high. No one else could get close!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing finally arrived, but both were immediately nailed to the ground by shock at the scene before them, unable to move a single step more.

No martial god could watch a battle such as this and not be seized with excitement!

Seeing that Hua Cheng was perfectly fine, Xie Lian's restless heart was finally at ease. He wanted to collapse to the ground immediately, to scream and yell, but he forced himself to hold it in. When skilled fighters clashed, any sudden disturbance could decide victory or defeat. And this was a battle between two Supreme Ghost Kings!

On White No-Face's side, there was another figure standing in the far distance—the state preceptor. Naturally, he had been brought here by White No-Face. The man breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that Xie Lian and company had come, but he didn't dare to recklessly make noise either.

However, Hua Cheng had already noticed the newcomers. His icy focus melted slightly, and a grin finally spread across his face.

"It seems you've failed again. His Highness has arrived, and there is not a single person missing from his group."

Xie Lian couldn't hold back any longer and shouted, *"San Lang!"*

Hua Cheng inclined his head as he answered, "Gege." His tone then turned to one of warning. "Gege, I'm going to get mad the next time you make yourself fall like that."

Xie Lian gave him a warning too. “I’ll get even *madder* the next time you jump down with me!”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s face stiffened for a second, as if Xie Lian’s words really did cause him momentary dread. Even facing off against White No-Face, he’d never shown such an expression before.

White No-Face crushed in close. The one he struck at was Hua Cheng, but the one he spoke to was Xie Lian. “Xianle, you two are far too delighted with each other right now. Shouldn’t you be taking me a bit more seriously?”

The eyeball on Eming’s hilt caught sight of Xie Lian and started spinning wildly. Hua Cheng flipped his hand and thrust, and Xie Lian heard a *crack.*

His heart lurched.

That was the sound of a weapon breaking!

All those present hastily looked to see where the sound had come from. The scimitar in Hua Cheng’s hand was fine, but the longsword wielded by White No-Face had been snapped in half by his strike!

Eming’s eyeball spun wildly once more, as if showing off in front of Xie Lian had made it so happy it was in heaven.

Hua Cheng laughed heartily. “It’s fine. There’s no reason for gege to worry,” he said easily, then addressed White No-Face. “And why should I care for the likes of you?”

White No-Face humphed. Afraid that Hua Cheng would enrage his opponent, the state preceptor couldn’t hold back anymore and shouted to him, “Young man, don’t be so cocky!”

However, what Hua Cheng said next was even more audacious and brazen. He smiled as he pointed the sparkling, sharp scimitar at White No-Face with one hand.

“After all, at the end of the day, you’re just a jealous old geezer.”

The state preceptor couldn’t even bother to berate his fake smile at this point. Even Feng Xin and Mu Qing were stunned.

The guts of this man! Who would dare say such a thing directly to Jun Wu or White No-Face?!

They all had to admit that only Hua Cheng would dare, for he was probably the only one against whom neither Jun Wu nor White No-Face could retaliate!

Mu Qing got off Feng Xin's back on his own and walked a few steps, mumbling to himself. "No wonder… In the past…Jun Wu always told us to avoid Crimson Rain Sought Flower if we could and to never face him head-on."

A ball of white shadow flashed in front of the point of Eming's blade, blocking it. Xie Lian's sharp eyes identified the creature, and he shouted, "San Lang, don't cut that thing!"

It was the fetus spirit! Xie Lian saw it, so naturally Hua Cheng did as well. He easily slowed the blade's momentum, and with a slant of its tip, the slashing motion became a flick that flung away the white ball. Once Feng Xin saw that the fetus spirit hadn't been chopped in half, his shrunken pupils returned to normal.

Shaking off his shock, he yelled, "Come here!"

Hua Cheng had flung the fetus spirit precisely in his direction, and Feng Xin rushed forward to catch it. However, the sparse hair on the fetus spirit's head bristled as soon as it heard Feng Xin's shouted order, and angry snarls gurgled from its throat. The moment Feng Xin approached, it chomped at him like mad and refused to let him pick it up.

Feng Xin couldn't help but be outraged. "Fucking hell! It sticks to *him* the moment it sees him, but when it sees me, it bites. Just who's your dad here?!"

"Have you ever thought of it as your son?" Mu Qing cut in. "Have you ever even called it by its proper name?"

This comment left Feng Xin stumped. "I…"

Meanwhile, Xie Lian couldn't sit still and watch the battle anymore. "The two of you be careful," he hastily instructed. "I'm going up for a closer look!"

"You be careful yourself!" Mu Qing said quietly. "Don't forget, you still have two shackles…"

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback. Unthinkingly, he touched his neck to feel the cursed shackle there. For some reason, he didn't think White No-Face would use the shackle against him.

There was no more time for words; he rushed forward.

A flash of red and a flash of white whirled in vicious battle. After observing for a moment, Xie Lian determined it would be difficult to plunge into the chaotic fight. For now, he whipped out Ruoye to wrap up the state preceptor and pull him over.

"Master! Are you all right?"

The state preceptor wiped the cold sweat from his face. "…Fine!"

"If you're fine, then why are you sweating so heavily?" Xie Lian asked.

"That's all thanks to Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the little bastard with no filter on his mouth! What a fright!" the state preceptor cried.

Just then, Feng Xin let out a surprised shout. Xie Lian raised his head and saw that White No-Face was slowly lowering his hand.

He was injured. He opened his palm and glanced down at his blood-drenched hand, let out a sigh, and then chuckled.

"…It's been many years since anyone has managed to hurt me like this."

Xie Lian felt a sense of foreboding. "Master, is he…angry?"

Right now, the state preceptor was the one who best understood White No-Face—perhaps the only one in the world who did. "No…he's worse than angry. He's…happy."

After a pause, White No-Face turned to Hua Cheng. He sounded quite interested as he asked, "Your scimitar…did you forge it using your missing eye?"

It was obvious Hua Cheng had no interest in responding, but Xie Lian's heart jolted violently.

From the first time he saw Eming, he knew that the scimitar was unusual. He had half guessed that it might have been forged from the eye Hua Cheng had lost, but White No-Face sounded so certain—could it really be true?

The state preceptor’s brow wrinkled, and after a moment, he said, “Oh, I remember now.”

“What do you remember?” Xie Lian asked.

“I once heard my friends speak of an incident,” the state preceptor said. “Many centuries ago, a wrath ghost came to Mount Tonglu.”

“I’m sure at least a million wrath ghosts have paid a visit to Mount Tonglu,” Mu Qing said.

“Don’t interrupt!” the state preceptor exclaimed. “That wrath ghost… he was newly formed, very young. He was already on the brink of dissipating completely when he arrived, yet for some reason he held on and drifted here.”

Although he didn’t know why, Xie Lian’s heart started racing. “Almost dissipated? Why?”

“He had suffered grievous injuries,” the state preceptor replied. “His soul was almost fully dispersed, and hardly any conscious mind remained to him. But still he floated along, repeating again and again that he wouldn’t leave, he wouldn’t leave—probably because his wish hadn’t been fulfilled. Anyway, an accident happened when Mount Tonglu opened that year.”

When Xie Lian heard “he wouldn’t leave,” for some reason he felt almost happy, even as his heart squeezed for the little ghost.

“What kind of accident?” he asked quickly.

“Not only had millions of ghosts converged on Mount Tonglu, but a group of living humans had accidentally wandered into this forbidden land and were locked inside.”

“What?!”

“The only things that live inside Mount Tonglu’s domain are nefarious creatures. Ordinary people have no way to break out of the domain; their certain fate is to become nourishment for the rest. But the wrath ghost, in his confused state, took the large group of living humans under his wing and fled for many days—for what reason, I can't say. They were eventually cornered and surrounded by nefarious creatures, and the wrath ghost was about to be eaten along with the humans."

Xie Lian knew that the solitary, wandering ghost must have been Hua Cheng!

"And then?" he pushed. "Was there a way to flee to safety?"

"Yes," the state preceptor replied. "He could escape by forging a blood weapon and killing his way out."

Mu Qing couldn't help but chip in. "Then wouldn't the easiest sacrifice be…?"

It would be the group of humans that had fallen into such a hopeless position!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stared at Hua Cheng, who was wholly absorbed in the vicious fight against White No-Face. "Did…did he…"

Xie Lian held his breath.

"Yes," the state preceptor said. "He made a move."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing's expressions were unreadable. Xie Lian, however, didn't move a muscle and only waited for the state preceptor to continue.

Sure enough, the state preceptor's story progressed as he had anticipated. "He made a move. In a fit of madness, he dug out one of his own eyes."

"…"

"The wrath ghost almost made a move against the humans as well, but for some reason, he didn't go through with it," the state preceptor continued. "He instead used one of his own eyes as the price to forge a blood weapon. The wrath ghost was already clinging to existence with his last breath; after digging out his eye, he should've broken apart completely. But something had shocked him to action, and he instead fully regained his senses. I don't know what kind of wicked weapon he forged, but it somehow carried him through that battle. And there was another curious incident after that."

Xie Lian forced himself to calm down. “Wh-what incident?”

“After that battle, the heavens sent forth a Heavenly Tribulation and lightning struck straight into Mount Tonglu,” the state preceptor said. “Do you understand what that means?”

Was there any need to explain? If a Heavenly Tribulation had been sent forth, it meant the heavens believed there was someone worthy of ascension within Mount Tonglu.

Xie Lian grabbed the state preceptor. “Who was it? Who ascended?!”

“This is all hearsay,” the state preceptor said. “But there has never been a heavenly official in the Upper Court who hailed from Mount Tonglu. Either what I heard was purely fabricated, or…”

The person who ascended rejected the Heavenly Realm and jumped right back down!

Mu Qing couldn’t accept it. “Ascending as a ghost?!” he cried in shock. “Is that even possible? And he *refused* and jumped back down?! It couldn’t have been him, could it? He had only just entered Mount Tonglu—he hadn’t even reached the rank of supreme! Jumping all the way down like that…he couldn’t have even been sure he’d survive! Why did he do it?!”

Why had he gone to such extremes?

Just then, Xie Lian heard White No-Face sigh.

“Xianle, you have a very faithful believer.”

As soon as he spoke, the cracked cry-smiling mask loomed before Xie Lian’s face; the sight of it reflected clearly in his eyes. He was mere inches away. Xie Lian hadn’t expected White No-Face to draw so close in no more than an instant.

Ruoye shot up like it was bristling and ready to strike, but in the end it shrank back. It wasn’t its fault, for it had always been very intelligent—it would give up voluntarily if it knew that its attacks wouldn’t work.

White No-Face seemed to flash a smile, for the cry-smiling mask’s crack grew deeper.

The point of Eming’s blade grazed White No-Face’s neck mere seconds later, but it was late by a step; White No-Face had already dodged away in a flash. He reappeared on the highest point of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, the point where it abruptly ended, and lifted his hand slightly.

“No need to be nervous. I was only taking back what’s mine.”

In his hand, he held a longsword. It was entirely pitch-black and as frigid as cold jade, with a silver streak down the blade’s central ridge—as if its heart had been split in half. Xie Lian reflexively twisted his hand to feel his back; sure enough, the blade Fangxin that he had carried on his back was gone.

Fangxin was originally the Crown Prince of Wuyong’s sword. White No-Face had retrieved what belonged to him.

One piece, two pieces, three pieces. The ghastly pale mask flaked off bit by bit until, finally, it fell completely and revealed the face behind. Within the raging flames, the white robe transformed into white armor.

At last, White No-Face had taken off his mask and transformed into Jun Wu.

Everyone held their breath, high on guard.

There was no need to guess. He had to be even stronger in this form.

“Young man, don’t underestimate your opponent!” the state preceptor shouted at Hua Cheng. “He’s even more difficult to deal with now than he was as White No-Face! You had the advantage of a better weapon earlier, but not anymore!”

Sure enough, all of the wounds on Jun Wu’s body vanished in one sweep; he was restored from head to toe. He glanced at the state preceptor and smiled.

“Giving others advice on how to fight me while I’m right here… I won’t kill you, but you’re certainly becoming bolder.”

That smile was laced with warning. Although the state preceptor stopped speaking, he still returned Jun Wu’s gaze measure for measure.

“Don’t worry, San Lang has never underestimated his opponents,” Xie Lian assured him.

He was more than sure of this. No matter how brazenly fearless Hua Cheng’s smile seemed, his hands would never relax.

Gazing at the sword, Jun Wu gently whispered, “Zhuxin, long time no see.”

Fangxin—or Zhuxin, as it should now be called—gave a deep, quiet moan in his hand.

Xie Lian had always thought that Fangxin was difficult to use because it was old; he even worried it might snap in half one day. He never expected its aura and power to be so different in the hands of its past master compared to his own!

Each time Zhuxin and Eming clashed, the entire Heaven-Crossing Bridge shook as if it might collapse and plummet into the lava. Jun Wu’s power and speed had clearly increased by a huge margin. While Hua Cheng was able to match his pace, he still frowned and his jaw clenched harder. Those watching the fight from afar were in a constant state of tension, for every one of Jun Wu’s forceful strikes were aimed straight at Hua Cheng’s right eye!

Hua Cheng blocked twice, but both attacks were alarmingly close to hitting. He quickly realized Jun Wu was using the same attack each time, as if he had determined Hua Cheng’s weakness was his right eye and wanted to gouge it out a second time. Naturally, every time he lunged, Hua Cheng defended with all he had and blocked again and again. But with this strategy, wouldn’t they soon find themselves at an impasse and accomplish nothing?

As though it sensed danger, Eming’s eye raged with unbridled fury. The black jade blade struck again, and there was a crisp sound of impact. *Clink!*

Hua Cheng hadn’t raised his scimitar to parry, but Jun Wu withdrew his sword.

Xie Lian, a second streak of white, had rushed in to protect Hua Cheng.

With a single swift, forceful flick, Zhuxin’s chilling blade rebounded!

Xie Lian finally couldn’t sit back and watch any longer and had joined the fight. He was skilled in the art of catching blades with his bare hands, but this was the first time he had ever encountered such a sinister sword. A simple light flick had left half his arm numb, especially the palm; the feeling only returned after he backed away a few steps and shook it off.

“Gege?” called Hua Cheng from behind him.

“C’mon, let’s do this together!” Xie Lian said.

Standing back-to-back, they focused their battle resolve against their enemy. Jun Wu’s smile only deepened at their display.

“Oh?”

“You take the top and I’ll take the bottom!” Xie Lian said quietly.

As soon as he spoke, the two split off and flew toward Jun Wu, one going up and one going down.

Xie Lian had a good grasp of Jun Wu’s style and could guess his next move. “Hook!” he blurted.

Hua Cheng did as directed and unleashed his scimitar once more. Sure enough, Jun Wu almost fell for the trick, and Xie Lian then instructed, “Blast!”

Hua Cheng again did as he was ordered. This time, he didn’t use his scimitar—instead, he churned his spiritual powers and blasted with his bare hand. Sure enough, Jun Wu was hit in the shoulder and sent reeling for a moment; if not for his wicked speed, those two moves would’ve probably been fatal hits.

As they battled, Xie Lian swiftly came to his senses. Hua Cheng was a supreme of their time; with his level of skill, why would he need Xie Lian’s directions? What a terrible affront; his old habits had come out! He was quick to apologize.

“I’m sorry! You don’t have to listen to me!”

Hua Cheng, however, only smiled happily in response. “Every piece of advice gege gives me is the best course of action. Why wouldn’t I listen?”

Suddenly, the bridge below Hua Cheng caved and he lost his footing—he was about to fall. Xie Lian leapt onto the bridge poles and cast Ruoye out to wrap up Hua Cheng and reel him back. But a moment later, he felt a sudden chill on his neck; Jun Wu had darted behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Excellent form, Xianle.”

He was too close. Xie Lian could feel his hair standing on end.

“Gege!” Hua Cheng exclaimed.

He flung out his left hand, and Eming shot through the air. Xie Lian reacted incredibly quickly and ducked just in time for Eming to hurtle past, brushing the top of his head as it slashed at Jun Wu behind him. Only then did Jun Wu release Xie Lian’s shoulder, and Xie Lian used the chance to leap back to Hua Cheng’s side just as Eming whirled back to his hand. The pair worked together seamlessly, and those on the side only saw three unimaginably fast figures flashing here and there like lightning, so fast they found it hard to breathe.

Meanwhile, Jun Wu’s laughter resonated across the domed ceiling above, like he was encouraging them. “Good. Very good! Continue!”

Mu Qing dodged away from a piece of the bridge caving in and asked in horror, “Master! Is…is he insane? He’s laughing!”

“I already told you!” the state preceptor said. “The only thing worse than him being angry is him being happy! This is only the beginning!”

Now that he was wielding Zhuxin, Jun Wu was like a tiger with wings. He launched vicious attacks nonstop, all of them aimed directly at Hua Cheng’s right eye. Xie Lian was stricken with panic at the sight. Whipping out Ruoye, he tangled Zhuxin’s hilt. However, Jun Wu suddenly reversed his grip on the sword and yanked, bringing Xie Lian flying toward him.

Xie Lian was startled at first, but he soon regained his calm. He’d originally intended to snatch the sword anyway, so there was nothing to be scared of. As he hurtled straight for the blade, his mind instantly played out all the hundreds of possible moves that they might exchange. Yet unexpectedly, halfway through the air, another hand caught him and pulled him back. Xie Lian dropped and landed. When he turned to look, Hua Cheng was there, shielding him.

A black jade sword pierced his chest through.

Xie Lian almost couldn’t breathe at the sight. “San Lang?!”

Hua Cheng’s expression was grim. Jun Wu had been waiting for Xie Lian to be impaled on Zhuxin’s blade and was rather disappointed to see that it had been blocked. He withdrew the sword from Hua Cheng’s chest and backed away. Xie Lian had completely forgotten that Hua Cheng was a ghost—he could still be up and about even if a giant hole was punched through his chest. Worried even so, he covered the unbleeding wound on Hua Cheng’s chest with both hands.

“San Lang, wh…what were you doing…so rashly…?!”

“As if I’d let it stab you again in front of me!” Hua Cheng responded. For some reason, his tone was a little too extreme. Xie Lian was slightly taken aback.

“Why do you ache so, Xianle?” Jun Wu’s gentle voice drifted in the air. “It is not as if he feels the pain—he is nothing more than a dead man.”

“…”

And he dared to remind Xie Lian of that! Consumed with fury, Xie Lian whipped his head around and glared. “Isn’t this all your fault?!”

Jun Wu only sneered in response. “*Is* it all my fault?”

His question stumped Xie Lian, and Jun Wu changed the subject.

“Perhaps. But Xianle, have you tarried in the Mortal Realm for so long that you’ve forgotten what you’ve done? Do you still remember what you did after Xianle fell?”

“…”

A deeply meaningful smile appeared on Jun Wu’s face as he leisurely asked, “Do you still remember a ghost named Wuming?”

In an instant, Xie Lian’s face lost all color. *“Don’t!”* he blurted.

The state preceptor sensed that things were going wrong. “Your Highness, what’s he saying? What did you do after Xianle fell?”

Xie Lian felt an odd sense of panic, and he glanced at Hua Cheng, then at Jun Wu. His fury had been transformed to uncertainty.

Hua Cheng immediately grabbed hold of him and soothed in a low voice, “It’s fine, Your Highness. Don’t be afraid.”

“Yeah, keep it together!” Feng Xin also called out.

Mu Qing, on the other hand, was sharper. “What did he mean? A ghost? What ghost?”

But how could Xie Lian keep it together?

Those were the most unkempt days of his life, days during which he committed the deed he most regretted. He’d never even dared to think of that period much. Whenever that pale, crescent-eyed smiling mask surfaced in his mind, his suffering rendered him sleepless and desperate to curl into a ball, never to unfurl and face another person again.

Hua Cheng had seen a Xie Lian who basked in glory, had seen a Xie Lian who had been defeated by a lost war. He’d seen a clumsy and foolish Xie Lian, an impoverished and beggared Xie Lian. All of that was nothing.

But he had never seen a Xie Lian who rolled in filthy mud, a Xie Lian who yelled and swore, a Xie Lian full of resentment and hate. He’d never seen a Xie Lian who was dead set on annihilating the Kingdom of Yong’an for revenge—or a Xie Lian who would go so far as to create Human Face Disease for the second time!

That period was too horrible to recall. In the past, he wouldn’t have cared one bit if White No-Face decided to rat him out, but now he couldn’t bear to find out what expression would cross Hua Cheng’s face when he learned of that time in Xie Lian’s life.

He wasn’t as good as Hua Cheng thought he was. He wasn’t untainted by filth, saintly and pure. If Hua Cheng showed even a sliver of doubt after learning the truth, Xie Lian would probably never be able to live with himself—and would never have the face to see him again!

As he considered all this, Xie Lian’s expression turned fiercely grim. Cold sweat rolled from his forehead, and his hands trembled. His reaction made Hua Cheng grip his hand harder.

“Your Highness, don’t be afraid,” he said with grave assurance. “Remember? The one basking in infinite glory is you; the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is *you*, not the state of you. No matter what happened in the past, I will never leave you. You can tell me anything.”

To conclude, he added gently, “You told me this yourself.”

Xie Lian started to pull himself together, but Jun Wu puffed a laugh.

“‘No matter what happens, I will never leave you,’” he said, the words unhurried. “My most faithful believers, as well as my dearest friends—they also told me that once.”

The state preceptor’s face changed, and Jun Wu shot a glance at him.

“But in the end, no one was able to truly do as they promised. As you can see.”

The state preceptor, unable to bear looking at him anymore, turned his head away.

“Believe me, Your Highness. Won’t you?” Hua Cheng pleaded.

It wasn’t that Xie Lian didn’t believe him—it was that he didn’t dare to try.

In the end, Xie Lian swallowed hard and forced himself to chuckle, but then he felt he shouldn’t be laughing and hung his head. His voice trembled as he said, “…San Lang, why don’t you… I’m sorry, I, I might…”

Hua Cheng stared at him for a moment, then began to speak. “I actually—”

Before he could finish, a wave of intense killing intent lunged at them, and the two leapt apart. Some sense returned to Xie Lian, and the color returned to his ghastly pale face. “What’s with him? Why is he even…”

Faster? Stronger?

Jun Wu’s speed and power had doubled and were still growing, far greater than they’d been as White No-Face. They could sense the horrifying surge with every attack!

Mu Qing noticed something else, and he shouted, “Your Highness! Be careful, he’s changed tactics! He’s not attacking Crimson Rain Sought Flower anymore…he’s just going after you now!”

Naturally, Xie Lian had also realized. Ruoye was the only weapon he had on hand, and it couldn’t attack Fangxin head-on; it shrank back at the very sight of it. Fortunately, Eming had flawlessly blocked every strike Jun Wu aimed at him.

Chapter 129:
Crack the White Armor; Curious Magic Shatters the Cursed Shackles

THE SWORD FANGXIN emanated dominating power, and those watching from afar could already feel themselves shudder at the mere sight of it—let alone Xie Lian, who was being forced back by its attacks, step by step.

Hua Cheng had been more than capable of taking on White No-Face alone, but the emergence of Jun Wu demanded both he and Xie Lian give it their all to even make an equal match. It was obvious that Jun Wu was at an advantage in having Mount Tonglu as his main spiritual domain; Xie Lian could sense grievous power suppressing them.

Jun Wu was also protected by a layer of white armor—it was an ancient spiritual weapon he had personally forged, and it was practically impenetrable. He only needed to guard his head. Hua Cheng's scimitar was incredibly fast and precise, and Xie Lian also struck wherever he could. The two of them launched an all-out barrage against Jun Wu—aiming at his neck, his heart, his back, his stomach, his shoulders. But nothing they did affected their opponent in the slightest.

"Stop wasting your strength! It's pointless!" Mu Qing shouted. "It's impossible to penetrate that white armor!"

"Aim for his waist, just beneath his ribs on the right!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Hua Cheng unleashed his scimitar again and struck where Xie Lian had instructed, but as expected, it did nothing.

"I told you it's pointless!" Mu Qing shouted. "Why don't you come up with a way to withdraw, and then we'll join the fight! Feng Xin! Where are your bow and arrows?"

Feng Xin was climbing around on the rocks trying to capture the fetus spirit, which was spitting wildly and slithering its tongue at him. When he heard the call, he answered, "All right! I'm coming!"

However, Xie Lian instructed, “Keep going—don’t stop! Attack his right side just below the ribs!”

“Your Highness!” Feng Xin shouted. “That armor is formidable—it might not crack even after hundreds of blows from that scimitar!”

Nonetheless, Xie Lian was adamant. “Don’t worry; just listen to me! It won’t take that many strikes!”

Hua Cheng didn’t question him and continued attacking nonstop. Finally, a crack appeared at the spot the blade had been targeting. Blood spurted.

Eming’s blade had cut into Jun Wu’s stomach on the right side, just below his ribs!

Gripping his scimitar in one hand, Hua Cheng stood before Jun Wu and met his gaze squarely with a cold, severe glare. Meanwhile, Xie Lian made it to Jun Wu’s side and Ruoye took the chance to bind Jun Wu’s hands, preventing him from blocking anymore.

Mu Qing was dumbfounded. “How is this possible?”

How had Hua Cheng so easily cut through that ancient white armor?!

Pulling Ruoye taut, Xie Lian eyed Jun Wu. “Did you forget…? You and I had a fight eight hundred years ago.”

It dawned on Feng Xin and Mu Qing. “Your second ascension?”

When Xie Lian had requested that Jun Wu banish him once more, he also suggested they face off in a match. Although they promised each other that neither would show mercy, in retrospect, Jun Wu must’ve still held back.

But Xie Lian used everything he had.

He unleashed over three thousand swords. Over four hundred of them managed to stab Jun Wu, and of those four hundred, more than a hundred had pierced this exact spot—his relentless barrage of swords broke through Jun Wu’s impenetrable, ancient white armor and stabbed the right side of his abdomen, just below his ribs.

That was the exact spot where Hua Cheng’s scimitar made it through!

Xie Lian had left a weak spot on Jun Wu's armor eight hundred years ago, and it only took three slashes from Hua Cheng to crack it! And Hua Cheng's scimitar was much fiercer than Xie Lian had ever imagined—it would surely inflict a critical hit when it cleaved into Jun Wu's abdomen!

He had only just sighed a mental breath of relief when he heard the state preceptor yell, "That's no use! He—"

Logically, Jun Wu's movement should've been hampered by this grave injury, but his expression didn't even change as he lowered his head to give the wound a glance. Just as Xie Lian sensed something was off, Jun Wu's hands moved slightly.

Xie Lian heard something tear, and his hold on the band went slack.

Ruoye…had ripped!

The white silk band dropped lifelessly to the ground—fully torn in half. An instant later, Xie Lian felt a hand around his throat, choking him as it lifted him off the ground.

He heard Hua Cheng exclaim, *"Your Highness!"* but his voice suddenly seemed far away. Jun Wu's voice, however, was right beside him.

"Xianle, did you truly believe that I know less of being *stabbed* than you do? Did you think I would care?"

"Stabbing him won't work, even if you do it hundreds of times!" the state preceptor called to him. "It seems…he cannot feel pain at all anymore…"

Xie Lian could take a longsword through the heart without flinching. Jun Wu was the same.

When he heard the state preceptor, Feng Xin lowered the bow he'd held drawn and aimed at Jun Wu. "What?! Then even if we manage to land a hit, it won't matter?!"

"I have some more bad news," Mu Qing said. "From what I've observed, I suspect he can heal faster than we can injure him."

"What?!"

Xie Lian could verify that. Jun Wu's wound had been terrifying; anyone else would've been bisected. But he'd already stopped bleeding.

"No need to be so surprised," Jun Wu said. "When you're constantly stabbed in the back, you'll die a thousand times over if you don't force yourself to recover right away. But the two of you are certainly something."

Jun Wu smiled.

"In the past eight hundred years, I've only been wounded by one sword and one scimitar, wielded by the two of you. Crimson Rain Sought Flower, stand back. You wouldn't want to see me wring Xianle's neck."

"…"

Hua Cheng's face was dark, and a roaring tempest raged in his eye. But Jun Wu was dangling Xie Lian over the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, and he would only need to release his grip to send Xie Lian plummeting into the fiery pool hundreds of meters below. A moment later, he reluctantly withdrew his scimitar, rested one hand behind him, and slowly backed away a few steps.

Although he appeared calm, the scimitar at his side gave him away. Eming was extremely agitated; its eyeball spun wildly and cast desperate looks at Xie Lian. Hua Cheng had to back up to the very edge of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge before Jun Wu was satisfied.

"That's good enough."

Still holding him by the neck, Jun Wu locked eyes with Xie Lian. Then, without warning, he brutally slammed Xie Lian into the nearby rock wall.

The collision was incredibly brutal. Xie Lian's head rang, and blood poured messily from his nose and mouth to flow down the contours of his face. He thought he could hear people screaming in alarm in the distance, but he couldn't tell who. The only thing he could hear clearly was Jun Wu's placid voice murmuring in his ear.

"Xianle, does it hurt when your head is smashed against a wall?"

Xie Lian couldn't quite process the question, so he didn't respond. Thus, Jun Wu grabbed him and slammed him into the rock wall again before asking him once more.

"Does it hurt? Does it hurt? Does it hurt?"

With each repetition, he slammed Xie Lian into the wall so hard that Xie Lian started screaming. But what he screamed was, “San Lang, don’t come over here! I’m fine—I’m fine! Absolutely *do not* come over!”

At least not yet—an opportune moment hadn’t arrived!

Hua Cheng was ready to charge over at the very first slam, but he hadn’t taken two steps before Xie Lian told him not to approach—and so he forced himself to stop. His face had turned completely savage, and the veins on the back of his shaking hands were about to burst.

Although Jun Wu wore no expression on his face, his hand furiously rammed Xie Lian into the rocks as he asked him over and over again, “Does it hurt? Does it hurt?”

“Your Highness!” the state preceptor cried out. But who knew for whom he was calling?

Xie Lian’s bloody hands pushed against the uneven rocky surface of the wall. He grit his teeth as he roared, *“…It hurts!”*

Only then did Jun Wu flash a satisfied smile and spare Xie Lian’s poor head. He settled him on the ground. Xie Lian fell back clutching his ringing skull as tears and blood flowed uncontrollably down his face.

Jun Wu crouched next to Xie Lian and stared at him for a while. And then, he raised a hand and stroked Xie Lian’s head, before gently wiping the blood from his face.

“…”

The gesture was gentle and affectionate, like that of a father comforting a child he had just beaten black and blue.

The scene made the hair on Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s necks stand up. “Has he… Has he gone mad?”

Hua Cheng’s hand rested on his scimitar, and his knuckles cracked. The pupil of Eming’s eyeball shrank and went bloodshot.

Xie Lian didn’t breathe a word and simply allowed Jun Wu to wipe him clean. Jun Wu muttered to himself as he did so.

“You silly child. If it hurts, why don’t you turn back? Do you think that if you keep slamming into a wall, keep smashing yourself against it, it will crumble on its own? Why not change course instead?"

"I won't turn back," Xie Lian stated.

Jun Wu raised his hand and slapped him—so hard and with such violence that it knocked Xie Lian to the ground with a loud *thud*. He was still dizzy when Jun Wu picked him back up.

In a tone that sounded like he had almost lost patience, Jun Wu asked him, "Must you anger me like this? Let me ask you again: will you change?"

Xie Lian coughed twice, then spat out a mouthful of blood. "I won't."

A crack finally appeared in Jun Wu's gentle expression, a flicker of savageness.

The state preceptor's face was grim. Seeing that this was going downhill fast, he shouted, "Your Highness! You never wanted to kill the boy! You really like him—you said so yourself! Have you forgotten?!"

Jun Wu snorted. "If I didn't like him, I wouldn't have exhausted all of my patience and tolerance on him alone for the past eight hundred years. He would've long since become part of the Heavenly Capital's foundation—trampled daily by thousands."

A sudden fury seized him, and he turned to Xie Lian.

"But he doesn't know what's good for him. Stubborn, capricious, unheeding of my every word! He just *had* to go against me! You won't change, will you? Very well—then why don't we see if this wall will fall if your head is cracked open against it!"

When he saw him lifting Xie Lian again, the state preceptor shouted to him hastily, "Your Highness! Your Highness! His Highness…the Little Highness is still ignorant! Just let him go this time, let it go! He will understand one day…"

Jun Wu spared a glance at him, and his chuckle grew grimmer. "Do you really think I've gone mad? Don't lie to me—he's not the one you think is ignorant. It's me. Isn't that right?"

The state preceptor was taken aback, and Jun Wu continued.

"You invested so much of yourself into nurturing, teaching, and guiding him, purely because you hoped he could win against me. All so you can prove that I was wrong and you were right—that you were *all* in the right. All so you can cling to the illusion of the perfect Crown Prince of Wuyong—and dismiss the Jun Wu standing before you now! Isn't that your goal? Did you really think I didn't know what you were thinking?!"

"That's not true!" the state preceptor cried. "Stop getting tied up in right and wrong, victory and defeat! I've never thought that way, never!"

But Jun Wu couldn't bear to listen anymore. He raised his voice, his tone sharp. "Forget it! Let me tell you right now, *all* of you can forget it! No one can win against me! Especially *him*!"

Laughing maniacally, he dragged Xie Lian over to the rocks again, slamming him into them as he bellowed, "Will you change? Will you change?! *Will you change?!*"

As if he'd also gone mad, Xie Lian gripped Jun Wu's arm and roared, "I won't! I won't! *I won't change!*"

Even though the beating was so excruciatingly painful that it made him see stars, he stubbornly endured. He adamantly refused to give the desired answer, adamantly refused to change—and oh how gratifying it was!

He'd been pent up for far too long. It was as though he'd been waiting for a chance like this all these years, and tears rolled as he screamed, "I won't change! Even if it's painful, even if I die, I won't change, *I will never change!*"

Now the tables had turned—Jun Wu was no longer driving Xie Lian mad; Xie Lian was the one pushing Jun Wu to madness! Eyes bloodshot, Jun Wu was about to punish him with another strike when he came to a sudden halt.

He craned his neck to peer behind him. A long saber was stuck in his shoulder, and eight long arrows made of sticks were neatly pinned into his back.

Neither of those things mattered, for neither the saber nor the arrows had penetrated his white armor.

However, his right hand was gone.

That was the hand he'd been using to hold Xie Lian, and it was gone. All of it, vanished from his wrist, the cut neat and clean.

Xie Lian was also gone.

When he turned his head, he sensed something hurtling directly at him, sharp winds whistling around its flight. With a swing of his left hand, he caught the projectile—and realized afterward that it was his own right hand.

Across the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, Hua Cheng held a blood-drenched Xie Lian. With one hand, he gripped his scimitar in a reverse hold as he hugged Xie Lian's shoulders. He covered the wounds on Xie Lian's head with the other.

"Keep your filthy hands off him," he said in a chilling tone.

Xie Lian's obstinate refusal to admit defeat had finally enraged Jun Wu enough that he'd left himself open!

Jun Wu stuck his hand back onto his wrist, twisted it a couple of times to work out the kinks, and then plucked the arrows from his back. Something seemed to cross his mind, and when he glanced behind him, his eyes happened to land on the one still gripping the long saber—the pale-faced Mu Qing. Mu Qing was startled when their eyes met, but he forced himself to remain calm.

That calm didn't last long.

Jun Wu glanced at his shoulder. "As expected," he idly commented. "Compared to Xianle, you're still lacking."

Mu Qing's expression shifted. The long saber in his hand abruptly dropped, and a moment later, his face changed color completely. He yanked up his sleeve only to find that the black cursed shackle around his wrist had tightened. The veins and nerves around it were bulging as if all the blood in his body was being drawn to that point.

Feng Xin saw that Mu Qing was frozen in place and shouted at him, "What are you doing just standing there?! Run!"

"Feng Xin, you little idiot, how can he run with injured legs?" the state preceptor berated.

“Oh, fuck!” Feng Xin blurted. He’d completely forgotten!

Normally, Mu Qing would’ve been so angry at this that his eyes would have rolled all the way back into his head. But now, he knew it’d be pointless even if he fled—thanks to the cursed shackle on his wrist, it wouldn’t matter where he ran.

Feng Xin swore. He was about to go over to Mu Qing when Jun Wu hurled the arrows he’d plucked out of his back right at him. Feng Xin felt his chest go cold, and he looked down. All eight arrows had been returned to him—neatly piercing his chest.

Jun Wu walked languidly toward Hua Cheng and Xie Lian, but Hua Cheng didn’t spare him a single glance.

“Gege? Gege?” he called to Xie Lian, who was still in his arms.

Xie Lian had taken a brutal battering, and it took a while for him to blearily come around, his head still throbbing. But before his eyes even blinked open, he muttered, “…San Lang? Are you all right?”

Hua Cheng gazed at him for a moment, then suddenly pulled him hard into an embrace. “I’m completely fine,” he replied softly. “Why don’t you take a look at yourself?”

Xie Lian clung to the one who held him. Although the hug was very tight, it did not press on any of his wounds. With great effort, Xie Lian opened his eyes and took in all the chaos around them.

Mu Qing was frozen on the spot, one hand clutching the opposite wrist as if he was fighting for control against the blood-sucking cursed shackle. Judging by how pale he was, he might not hang on for much longer.

Feng Xin, on the other hand, was slumped over the edge of the bridge. The eight arrows hadn’t pierced him completely through, but his injuries were still severe. The fetus spirit was howling in demonic elation, jumping up and down around him before stomping wildly on Feng Xin’s face with one foot. Despite his fury, Feng Xin couldn’t move for fear of worsening his injuries.

Meanwhile, all of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge had started to cave in, stretch by stretch, block by block. They might go down with it at any moment!

When he finally processed the situation they found themselves in, Xie Lian panicked and tried to stand. Hua Cheng helped him, and the two rose to their feet. They both gazed ahead.

Jun Wu was languidly walking toward them. The firelight all around him made him seem much bigger than he was, and he cast an immense shadow. Staring hard at the approaching figure, Xie Lian wiped hard at the blood around his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Zhuxin's blade coursed with spiritual power in Jun Wu's hold, the blade at a relaxed slant. At that moment, Jun Wu was so calm that he seemed almost a completely different person from the Jun Wu who had manically slammed Xie Lian into the rocks.

"Xianle, you know that your defeat is assured."

He understood Xie Lian too well. Jun Wu knew exactly how he would fight, and his spiritual power overwhelmingly dwarfed Xie Lian's. Xie Lian could sense that Jun Wu's battle aura and spiritual powers had grown even stronger before they exchanged a single blow. In the end, Mount Tonglu was his territory, and it was becoming more and more obvious just how it suppressed their abilities.

Xie Lian knew that was probably true. He couldn't win.

But even if he couldn't, he had to fight!

"No," Hua Cheng interjected. "Your Highness, you can win."

Stunned, Xie Lian stared at him, and Hua Cheng returned his gaze measure for measure.

"You can win. You're stronger than him." His one eye was as bright as if it were ablaze, and he said with certainty, "Believe me. He's wrong. You're right. You're stronger than him. You're *much* stronger than him!"

Jun Wu let out a deep, quiet chuckle. Perhaps he was amused by Hua Cheng's naivete, or perhaps he was pleased by all the power he twisted so effortlessly between his fingers.

He alone held the power of millions of believers in his grasp!

Hua Cheng gripped Xie Lian's shoulders. "So what? They're millions of fools; they're all useless trash! But for you, one person is enough!"

One person was enough?

Xie Lian hadn't yet wrapped his head around that before Hua Cheng pulled him close.

His eyes widened as spiritual power exploded and rushed in.

This was the most overwhelming transfer of spiritual power he'd ever experienced. Even the wraith butterflies and molten vengeful spirits all around them felt its terrifying intensity—one by one they began to explode, shrieking as they burst into nothingness.

Xie Lian's fingers were practically convulsing. His legs shook so badly that he was about to fall to his knees. In his mind, he cried again and again, *Stop! No more!* But Hua Cheng's hand was firmly locked behind his head, not letting him leave, refusing his refusal.

A long time passed before Hua Cheng finally released him and his throat relaxed. Xie Lian's knees buckled, and he dropped to the ground. His hands flew out to support him, and he managed, with great effort, to keep himself from falling over completely.

Jun Wu paused his steps and stared at them, his expression severe.

Feng Xin, who was lying some distance away, said with disbelief, "Your… Your Highness, your…your…?"

Reaching out with trembling hands, Xie Lian felt his own neck.

But there was nothing left for him to feel.

Hua Cheng had poured too much spiritual power into him, so much more than the cursed shackle could ever hope to restrain.

The two shackles that had fettered him for eight hundred years had shattered!

Chapter 130:
Smiling as Red Robes Fade

"HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?" Mu Qing muttered. "How can there be so much…?!"

To shatter cursed shackles with spiritual power alone—it was completely unheard of for *anyone* to manage such a feat!

Xie Lian was slumped on the ground, but Hua Cheng pulled him to his feet. "Gege, try fighting again!"

At the same moment, Jun Wu lunged at them with his blade drawn. Without thinking, Xie Lian raised his hand to slap it away.

Clang!

Zhuxin was almost sent flying.

This strike was something completely different.

Xie Lian stared at his hands, feeling a little dazed. It had been hundreds of years since he felt like this—indomitable, barely able to control his own strength, each step shaking mountains. One step to cross a thousand miles, one step to ascend to the heavens! He'd almost forgotten that he was ever like this.

He clenched his hand, then violently punched Jun Wu in the face!

Throughout their battle so far, Jun Wu's face had remained untouched. When the punch landed, a drop of blood finally flowed from the corner of his lips. He thumbed it away and gave it a glance.

The next second, he threw Zhuxin aside with a toss of his hand.

He was going to fight Xie Lian with bare fists.

Xie Lian threw another punch, but Jun Wu caught his wrist and twisted it around. Agony spiked through Xie Lian's arm as it dislocated with a *crack*; however, he instantly popped it back into place. He struck again, but his fist was again seized by Jun Wu. Seeing that things still weren’t going well, Xie Lian considered snatching up Fangxin, which had been tossed away. But Jun Wu predicted he’d try that and blocked his path.

However, Jun Wu had forgotten that Feng Xin and Mu Qing were still behind him. Although they were both so injured they could hardly move, they had hatched a plan to sneak around and grab Fangxin.

They moved extremely lightly and stealthily, yet it was as if Jun Wu had grown eyes on his back, and he sent a palm blast behind him. The bridge under their feet cracked and crumbled, and they both fell with it, plunging toward the lava stream!

At the last moment, a hand caught Feng Xin’s boot, and Feng Xin caught Mu Qing’s boot. When Feng Xin looked up, he cried, “What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?! State Preceptor, Your Elderliness, please don’t ever let go, all right?!”

It was, in fact, the state preceptor who caught them; veins were bulging violently on his forehead. “So you *do* know I’m too old for this?! Hurry and climb up, then!”

When Jun Wu smashed that section of the bridge, Xie Lian raised a hand to grab it and keep it suspended in midair. He wanted to lift it a bit further, but Jun Wu wouldn’t give him the space. And so the three of them were hanging a mere dozen meters away from the churning lava; they could even hear each bubble pop. Mu Qing especially was in a terrifying position—dangled at the very bottom of the chain, and worse, upside down. If they weren’t careful, his head would get a lava bath.

Steam had boiled Mu Qing’s face as red as a hot coal. “Quick, pull me up!” he cried. But the two above him didn’t even manage to yank on him twice before he shouted again, “Wait! Don’t pull me up!”

“Which do you want?!” The state preceptor cried in exasperation.

“Are you for real? Fine, I’m letting go!” Feng Xin yelled.

“What the fuck?! Fucking let go for real, I dare you!” Mu Qing cursed. He gestured below. “Look down! Look, the sword!”

Only then did they notice the black jade longsword that was slowly sinking in the heart of the lava stream right below them. It was Fangxin—

the sword they'd been trying to steal before Jun Wu shook them off the bridge!

As if he desperately wished he were a gibbon, Mu Qing reached out and crazily swung his arms at the sword. But he couldn't reach it, no matter how he tried. "Lower me down a bit more—just a bit more and I can get it!"

The veins on the state preceptor's forehead were throbbing even harder now. "Don't overdo it, you little pair of brats! I'm only an old sack of bones!"

As he said that, he lowered the boot in his hand, and Mu Qing's face drew another notch closer to the surface of the lava. His hair slipped loose, and the ends were set alight.

"Fucking hell, your hair's on fire! It's all gonna burn!" Feng Xin exclaimed.

Thankfully, Mu Qing had finally pulled the sword out of the stream. He tossed the sword toward Xie Lian, sending splashes of lava along with its flight, and then began frantically slapping away the patches of flame on his hair.

"Xie Lian, catch!"

Xie Lian swung his arm upward and caught Fangxin by the hilt!

As for the state preceptor, he was at his limit. "I can't do this anymore! Both of you, get up here, now!"

Feng Xin saw that the state preceptor was trembling and realized things were going bad. He yanked at Mu Qing and flung him higher. "Enough of all your yammering and dillydallying!"

Taking issue at being hurled around like this, Mu Qing was winding up for a major fit. But before he could begin, dozens of molten vengeful spirits lunged out of the lava pool!

Like fish leaping out of water, the molten vengeful spirits surged upward and caught Feng Xin around the chest; if it wasn't for the spiritual light shielding his body, he probably would've been burnt to ash. Earlier, Feng Xin's arrows had sent the spirits running scared, but with hearts full of spite, they had stealthily dived below the lava's surface, followed him all the way here, and hid until they got a chance to drag him down. The state preceptor was also hauled forward by the sudden increase in weight and began to slip. It was now Mu Qing's turn to be at the very top of the chain, and he caught the state preceptor by his boots.

Feng Xin was already injured, and there were still a few arrows in his body that he'd forgotten to pull out. Although he fought the vengeful spirits with his bare fists, he was mindful that the people above him might lose their grip if he fought too hard—and so it was a very passive bout. More and more molten vengeful spirits gathered down below, climbing atop and over one another as they clung to Feng Xin. It was almost as if they were having a tug-of-war against the state preceptor and Mu Qing. Both sides had significant strength, and Feng Xin would surely be torn in half if this continued!

"Can we just get this over and done with?!" Feng Xin roared.

"Shut up!" Mu Qing yelled back.

Suddenly, he felt the weight he was holding lighten. The vengeful spirits had finally let go, so he quickly pulled the other two up to safety.

Feng Xin panted harshly, still visibly shaken. The shrieks and roars of the vengeful spirits continued to echo from below.

When they looked down into the pit, Mu Qing and the state preceptor said in unison, "Feng Xin, it's your son!"

"…"

Sure enough, a blanched creature was hopping among the red-hot molten vengeful spirits and crazily tearing at them with its teeth.

The molten vengeful spirits were all ancient ghosts, at least two thousand years old. Plus, they had banded into groups. Why would they be afraid of some little minion that wasn't even a baby? Even as it continued to scratch and bite, the fetus spirit's once chillingly white body was painted crimson red with burns and blood from head to toe. It was howling in a ghastly voice, not pitiful in the slightest and inspiring only horror, but Feng Xin exploded in outrage.

"A bunch of adults bullying a child; how fucking shameless! Cuocuo! Come here!"

The fetus spirit couldn’t defeat so many vengeful spirits, and fear had already sprouted in its heart. Hearing that someone was going to stand up for it, it let out a strange cry and jumped onto Feng Xin’s shoulder. With longbow in hand, Feng Xin yanked the arrows from his own chest and shot round after round, overturning the lava stream with their explosive impacts. As he did so, the fetus spirit hopped and screeched on his shoulder like it was jeering and cheering.

Xie Lian saw that they had escaped danger, and he finally relaxed. But just as he was about to focus on fighting Jun Wu again, he felt his chest tighten.

Jun Wu had seized him from behind, locking him in place. “Haven’t I told you before—where do you think you learned all your moves? I know everything about you!”

If Xie Lian couldn’t fight his way out of this hold, he was going to end up dead. But any move he could come up with to break free, Jun Wu would have already thought of too!

Just then, he heard Hua Cheng call out, “Gege, don’t be afraid! You must know a move he doesn’t! A move only you can use and he can’t!”

A light turned on in Xie Lian’s mind.

Did he have such a thing?

Yes, he did!

If he couldn’t break free, then he wouldn’t!

He turned in Jun Wu’s arms to face him and locked his own arms around his opponent. “I bet you don’t know about *this*!” he declared, enunciating each word.

Gripping Jun Wu tightly, Xie Lian carried him to the solid rock wall and slammed him against it with enormous force!

He put all of his power into the blow. Amidst the rumbling and crashing of rocks, he heard something breaking.

The sound had come from Jun Wu. His white armor had shattered!

At the same time, Jun Wu released him with a roar of outrage. “Get lost! Get lost—all of you, get lost!”

When Xie Lian saw it, a chill went down his spine. The things he saw—the things that just made Jun Wu go mad—were *faces*.

Those three faces had emerged once more!

Raising his sword, Xie Lian pierced Jun Wu's heart and nailed him to the rock wall.

Blood spurted from Jun Wu's mouth. Xie Lian had infused as much spiritual power as he could muster into the strike, and it exploded the instant Jun Wu was stabbed. No matter how strong their healing ability was, no one could recover from that blow!

The wall collapsed. Jun Wu had been pinned to it at first, but once it crumbled, he was brought to the ground with it and sprawled in the rubble.

Yet still he hadn't given up. His hand seized Fangxin's hilt, and he moved to write something upon the blade—some kind of spell that they had clearly better stop. But just as Xie Lian raised his hand, the state preceptor rushed over.

"Your Highness! Let it go, let it go!"

Xie Lian stopped. He wasn't sure which one of them the state preceptor was calling for, or whom he was begging to let go.

Jun Wu coughed out another mouthful of rage-filled blood. *"Get away from me!"*

The state preceptor knelt by his side. "Your Highness, let it go. Really, let it all go. Continuing this fight is pointless."

"You don't understand anything! *Get lost!*" Jun Wu yelled.

"You're right, I *don't* understand," the state preceptor said. "It's been so many years. You've been a god and you've been a ghost king. Everyone who deserved to be killed is dead; all you've ever wanted is in your grasp. So why are you doing this to yourself? What exactly do you want? What do you want to prove?"

Hearing this, confusion flashed across Jun Wu's face. But his daze didn't last long, and he violently gripped the state preceptor by the neck.

"Stop trying to lecture me! You have no right to lecture me!" he snarled. "*No one* has the right!"

Little strength remained to Jun Wu right now, so breaking free of his stranglehold would have hardly been difficult. Xie Lian was about to save his master when the state preceptor waved, signaling for him not to move.

“Oh, Your Highness,” the state preceptor continued.

Jun Wu glared at him coldly, but his hand didn’t loosen. Even if Jun Wu didn’t have sufficient strength, wringing the state preceptor’s neck was still an easy task and he was still in considerable danger. However, he just let Jun Wu choke him.

“When I set out to teach His Royal Highness, it was never my intent to nurture a version of you who had never walked the wrong path or to use him to humiliate you. He’s his own person, and you are your own,” the state preceptor said. “You were different people all along, with different paths, and that’s the most natural thing. I’ve told you that before, but you didn’t believe me. How about now?”

Jun Wu stared at him, not saying a word.

“I just genuinely really miss Your Highness,” the state preceptor said. “I miss our old Kingdom of Wuyong, I miss everyone from back then. I miss the days before we ascended. That’s all.”

“…”

“It’s been so many years,” the state preceptor added. “Just watching you makes me tired. Very tired. How about you? Aren’t you exhausted?”

As the number one martial god of the three realms, Jun Wu’s appearance and poise had always been perfect and untainted by filth. Only now, when all the light had faded from him, did Xie Lian notice that Jun Wu’s complexion was overly pale, even without those three faces. His contours were much too cold and hard, and the faint dark circles below his eyes made him appear indescribably gloomy. There was none of the gentle kindness he’d emanated when spiritual light had illuminated his form.

But even if he looked sickly, he finally looked alive.

“Your Highness, you’ve been defeated. Now set yourself free,” the state preceptor said gently.

“…Have I been defeated?” Jun Wu sounded a little lost.

The forceful wave of spiritual power had broken through the domed ceiling of the rocky cave, and scattered rays of wan sunlight peeked in. A few faint threads of rain drifted down.

As Xie Lian stood over Jun Wu, who lay sprawled on the ground, he noticed a trace of relief on his face. Like a heavy burden had finally been lifted.

He couldn’t help but wonder—deep down, perhaps Jun Wu had wished for someone to defeat him. For someone to put these relentless eons of brokenness and madness to an end.

A moment later, Jun Wu asked, “That move. What is it called?”

“…” Xie Lian raised his sleeve and wiped away the blood on the side of his face. “Shattering boulders on one’s chest.”

Jun Wu was briefly taken aback—it seemed that made him think of something. Finally, he chuckled and sighed as he closed his eyes. “Beautiful.”

He didn’t utter another word. Everyone could tell fatigue had overtaken him.

Xie Lian finally removed his hand from Fangxin’s hilt. He had no idea what to do next, so he unconsciously turned to Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng was still standing in the same spot—upon the only stretch of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge that hadn’t yet collapsed—and had been quietly waiting for him for a long time, arms crossed. Seeing that Xie Lian had turned to look at him, he met his eyes and smiled.

The state preceptor sat unmoving next to Jun Wu. “Your Highness, all of you should go now.”

He clearly didn’t intend to get up.

“Master, are you not coming?” Xie Lian asked.

The state preceptor shook his head. “I’ll keep His Highness company. After all, I didn’t stay by his side back then.”

The rain was coming down harder now. It scoured Jun Wu’s resting face, washing away the blood that flowed from his wounds. As it poured across his skin, Xie Lian thought that the three lesions on his face had faded somewhat. Maybe it was his imagination.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian took the bamboo hat from his back and lowered it over Jun Wu’s face to shield him from the rain.

The cursed shackle on Mu Qing’s wrist had broken off on its own, and Mu Qing punted the thing into the lava with a swift kick before forcing himself back into his cool, calm demeanor. The fetus spirit jumped down from Feng Xin’s shoulder and crawled to Jun Wu on all four limbs to touch him cautiously. Its attitude was completely different than when it was stomping on Feng Xin’s face, and Feng Xin stomped his own feet in anger at the sight.

Xie Lian, however, didn't care for anything else. With a battered face, he dashed straight for Hua Cheng like he had been reborn—in truth, he had only barely escaped death—and pounced on him.

"San Lang!"

Hua Cheng had just reached a hand out to Xie Lian when his tackle pushed him back a step. He wrapped his arms around him and smiled happily.

"Gege, you see? I told you that you'd win for sure, didn't I?" He lifted Xie Lian's face and carefully inspected it, then sighed. "You've gotten yourself all scraped up again."

A tiny silver butterfly fluttered where his fingers caressed, and the cuts faded. Xie Lian smiled happily in response. "I'll be more careful next time!"

Hua Cheng arched his brows, pretending to be cold and harsh. "There *is* no next time."

After a pause, Xie Lian withdrew his smile and said seriously, "San Lang, back when we were inside Mount Tonglu, I said that I wanted to tell you something after we got out. Do you still remember?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Of course I remember. I remember everything gege tells me."

Xie Lian hung his head. It took a moment before he finally gathered his courage and began to tell him the truth. "Earlier, Jun Wu divulged some bits of information about this. To be honest, I should've told you a long time ago. I just could never find the nerve, because I was afraid of how you'd react when you found out—"

"Found out that Your Highness almost became the White-Clothed Calamity, right?" Hua Cheng continued for him.

"You…?" Xie Lian murmured in shock.

Hua Cheng didn't answer him directly. Instead, he bent one knee and knelt on the ground before him. He raised his head to gaze at him with a broad smile. "How's this? Gege, do you remember now?"

How could he not? Back then, the nameless ghost had always bent the knee to him just the same! A phantom image of that pale smiling mask overlapped with Hua Cheng's current smiling face. Xie Lian's heart quivered, his knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground in front of him.

"San Lang…it…it was you all this time!"

Hua Cheng let out a small laugh as he continued to kneel, and his remaining eye gazed deeply at Xie Lian. "Your Highness, I've always watched you."

Xie Lian could still only utter one word. "You…you…"

He finally understood what all those seemingly unintentional words from Hua Cheng had meant.

So this was it. He had never imagined that Wuming was Hua Cheng!

He knew everything. He had seen everything. He had been there all along!

All at once, thousands of emotions and millions of words swarmed into his head. There was gratitude, there was shame, there was heartache, there was wild joy, but above all else, there was incurable love.

Xie Lian's heart was so full it was going to burst, but he could not squeeze out a single word to express himself. He could only tackle Hua Cheng forcefully with a cry of "San Lang!"

It was as if that was all he knew to say anymore, and he cried it again, *"San Lang!"*

Hua Cheng fell over with the tackle. He sat with Xie Lian on the ground, embracing him and laughing heartily. All his fears and worries had been swept away. Xie Lian circled his arms around Hua Cheng's neck tightly, laughing and laughing but feeling like he was going to cry.

But before his tears could fall, he suddenly noticed something was very wrong.

Although Hua Cheng was a ghost, his body had never been any different from that of an ordinary human. And yet, as Xie Lian held him now, his vivid red robes were going transparent.

Xie Lian grabbed him, demanding in alarm, "San Lang?! What's going on?"

Hua Cheng still seemed at ease. “It’s nothing. I’ve just overdone it a little.”

“…Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Xie Lian asked in shock. “How can you call this nothing?!”

It was the spiritual power—all that spiritual power!

When Hua Cheng transferred his power to Xie Lian, he always gave without restraint—as if he were an infinite source, as if all of it were free for Xie Lian’s taking. He just kept smiling, ever cheerful, never treating it like a burden. But his spiritual power wasn’t as inexhaustible as sand carried in by the rolling waves, so it couldn’t truly be endless.

He wouldn’t blame Hua Cheng for failing to say anything sooner; Xie Lian could only blame himself for failing to notice.

Panicked and full of remorse, Xie Lian cupped Hua Cheng’s face. “I’ll return it to you,” he said, then he kissed him.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing had been on their way over, but when they saw the scene before them, they hurriedly backpedaled dozens of meters to give them the space to do what they needed to do.

The cursed shackles were gone, so Xie Lian desperately tried to transfer all the spiritual power he could muster to Hua Cheng in the hope that he’d recover soon. He kissed him for a good while, but when he let go, the sleeves of Hua Cheng’s red robes and his silver vambraces were still translucent—half-transparent, even!

Xie Lian was shaken, fear overtaking his mind. He unconsciously reached out to cup Hua Cheng’s face again, leaning in to kiss some more, but Hua Cheng cradled Xie Lian’s face with swift hands and gave him a small peck with smiling lips.

“Although I’m happy gege is so forward, there’s no need to give me any more spiritual power. But if gege *isn’t* just lending spiritual power—if he simply wants to kiss me—I don’t mind at all. In fact, the more the better. I welcome it with open arms.”

Xie Lian gripped him tightly, on the brink of falling apart. “What’s going on…?!”

“I’m just taking a little break, that’s all,” Hua Cheng replied. “Gege, don’t be scared.”

Xie Lian clutched his head. “How can I not be scared? I’m going to lose my mind!”

Hua Cheng was the sort of person who would never let Xie Lian see him like this if it wasn’t a serious problem—so serious he could no longer hide it!

Spiritual power so abundant it could shatter two cursed shackles—just how much would that be, exactly? It would hardly be an exaggeration to say it’d require power as bountiful as the sea. So how could Hua Cheng claim he was fine?

They went through so much hardship to sort out this mess and tie off all the knots. They’d reopened the lines of communication between him, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing. The cursed shackles that had bound him for eight-hundred-some years had been shattered. Everything he’d always wanted to confess to Hua Cheng had already been said.

Yet when Xie Lian turned to run into Hua Cheng’s arms with a face full of smiles, what greeted him was a Hua Cheng who was about to fade away. How could he not be scared? He was going to go mad with fear!

Noticing something was wrong, Feng Xin and Mu Qing called out from afar, “Your Highness? What happened?”

They jogged a couple of steps in his direction, but they paused halfway when they sensed that they shouldn’t interfere so carelessly right now.

In that moment, Xie Lian had stopped caring for anyone else. He wore an expression of pure terror as he gripped Hua Cheng, and his heart had almost stopped beating. “What do I do?!”

Hua Cheng sighed quietly and extended his arms, once again folding Xie Lian into his embrace. “Your Highness, I’ve always watched you.”

That was the second time he’d said it, but his voice was softer and gentler than before. Mind blank, Xie Lian clutched the red robes at his chest.

“I know, I know. But…what should I do now?”

Hua Cheng's long, slender fingers gently combed through Xie Lian's mussed hair. "Your Highness…do you know why I refuse to leave?"

Xie Lian couldn't understand how Hua Cheng could still be so calm at a time like this—he, on the other hand, was panicking so hard he was trembling. Completely at a loss, he still blankly asked, "Why?"

"Because I have a beloved who is still in this world," Hua Cheng replied quietly.

Xie Lian was slightly stunned.

He'd heard that somewhere before.

"My beloved is a brave, noble, gracious special someone," Hua Cheng continued. "He saved my life, and I've looked up to him ever since I was young. But I wanted to catch up to him and become even stronger for his sake. Although he might not remember me well—we never really talked—I want to protect him."

He gazed at Xie Lian. "If your dream is to save the common people, then my dream is only you."

Relying on his memory, Xie Lian asked with a trembling voice, "But…you won't…be able to rest in peace…like this…?"

"I pray to never rest in peace," Hua Cheng replied.

In that instant, Xie Lian's breathing completely stopped. Frozen in this moment, he could faintly hear two voices, one questioning and the other answering.

"If your beloved knew you couldn't rest in peace because of them, they might feel troubled and guilty."

"Then I just won't let them know why I haven't left."

"If you meet too often, they'll find out sooner or later."

"Then I won't let them know I'm protecting them either."

That ball of ghost fire… The weak little ball of ghost fire he bought for a few pennies on that lantern night, long ago. The ghost fire who wanted to pull him up from the graves on a frozen winter's eve. The ghost fire who tried to shield him from White No-Face and wouldn't let him go near danger. The ghost fire who had screamed in torment on his behalf as a hundred swords pierced his heart!

"Your Highness, I understand your everything," Hua Cheng said quietly. "Your courage, your despair. Your kindness, your pain. Your resentment, your hate. Your wisdom, your foolishness.

"If I could, I would have you use me as your stepping stone, the bridge you take apart after crossing, the bones you need to trample on your climb, the sinner who endures the agony of a million knives. But I know you won't allow it."

As he spoke, the maple red of his robes continued to fade away.

Xie Lian tried to grab hold of him with shaking hands. He never stopped trying to transfer spiritual power to him, but even that couldn't prevent Hua Cheng from fading. His vision was going blurry, and his words staggered from his lips.

"All right…don't say any more. I get it…but…but don't be like this, all right? San Lang? I…I've borrowed so much spiritual power from you that I haven't repaid. And I'm not done telling you all the things that I wanted to say; there's still so much. It's been so long since anyone listened to me talk. Won't you stay? Don't…don't do this. I won't be able to take it. Twice, it's happened twice already—I really don't want there to be a third time!"

Hua Cheng had already vanished from this world twice because of him!

But Hua Cheng only replied, "To die in battle for you is my greatest honor."

Those words were like a fatal blow. Xie Lian could no longer hold back the tears in his eyes, and they began to pour. As if he were hanging on to the last thread of his life, he pleaded, "You said…you would never leave me."

But Hua Cheng replied, "There is no banquet in this world that doesn't come to an end."

Agony constricted his heart and throat, and Xie Lian couldn't speak another word. He bowed his head and buried it deep in Hua Cheng's chest.

Yet soon after, he heard Hua Cheng say above him, “But I will never leave you.”

Xie Lian’s head shot up.

“I will come back,” Hua Cheng said. “Your Highness, believe me.”

Although his voice was firm, his pale face had also begun to fade. Xie Lian wanted to touch his cheek, but his fingertips only slid through air. Startled, he locked eyes with Hua Cheng once more.

Hua Cheng’s gaze was both gentle and blazing. His remaining eye was filled with love as it stared at him silently. He said something, but there was no sound from his lips. Refusing to give up, desperate to hear him, Xie Lian reached out with both hands to grab him and yank him deeper into his arms.

But before he could do so, the one he was holding, and the one holding him, disappeared.

In an instant, Hua Cheng shattered into thousands of silver butterflies right before Xie Lian’s eyes, transforming into a breeze of twinkling stars that he could neither embrace nor hold.

Even as his arms came up empty, he maintained that hugging position, not moving a limb. He couldn’t tell if he hadn’t come to his senses yet, or if his body simply couldn’t move anymore, but he stayed there, kneeling, amidst the dreamlike array of butterflies, his eyes wide.

As they looked on from a distance, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had never imagined that this was how things would play out. Both their faces paled as they rushed forward.

“Your Highness!”

Feng Xin was the first to arrive. “How did things go so wrong out of nowhere?! Wasn’t he fine just a few minutes ago?! Was it because of the cursed shackles?!”

Mu Qing hobbled up right behind him. He couldn’t jump, so he instead yelled at the silver butterflies, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower! Don’t mess around; if you’re not dead, then come the hell out!”

Naturally, the silver butterflies did not answer him. They fluttered erratically, flapping their wings and rising toward the sky. Feng Xin reached out to pull Xie Lian up, but he remained weighted to the ground like a stone.

Feng Xin didn’t know what to do anymore. “Is there some way we can help? Do you need spiritual power? Can he be saved? What should we do?!”

Mu Qing, however, had already figured out what had happened. “Drop it; just shut your mouth! We can’t do anything at this point.”

The air was alight with a shimmering, twinkling glow. The butterflies’ wings sparkled, just as they had during their first reunion after eight hundred years apart.

A silver butterfly drifted over and lightly brushed the back of Xie Lian’s hand, his cheek, his forehead. Its actions were full of affectionate longing, as if it were whispering its goodbyes. Xie Lian numbly extended a hand and let it rest there.

The silver butterfly fluttered its wings in delight, and sure enough, it lingered for him. But it too couldn’t last. It wasn’t long before it scattered on the wind like the rest.

However, in the spot where it had perched on Xie Lian’s third finger, there was still a bright, vivid red string.

***

"And then?"

"It's done."

"It's done?"

"It's done."

Pei Ming finally could hold back no longer. "That's not possible. This can't be all there is. Even an amateur like me can tell we're not done yet."

Mu Qing dropped the heavy bookkeeping report on the table. "This is my work, and it's done," he said coolly. "I can calculate all of it again on the spot; please listen closely, General Pei. Take away 8,880,000 merits, then add 6,660,000 merits, plus another 17,200,000 merits, then minus—"

"All right, that's enough, you don't need to count anymore," Feng Xin interrupted. "The numbers are right, but there must've been a lot left out; it should've worked out otherwise!"

"That's not my problem," Mu Qing countered. "Either way, my calculations are right. Maybe you should find someone else to do the accounting? If I had known things were gonna be like this, I would've minded my own business."

After the Heavenly Capital was destroyed, the scattered and scrambled heavenly officials finally assembled and set up a ward to establish a temporary Upper Court at the summit of Mount Taicang, a place no mortals cared about. Currently, the heavenly officials were in the heat of discussion about the construction of the new Heavenly Capital.

The enormous fire had very unfortunately razed the heavenly officials' glorious golden palaces, forcing them to squeeze together in temporary tents as they conferred and rested. Furthermore, a great number of scrolls and reports were lost. Even as the bickering dragged on for days and days, they still couldn't straighten out any of their accounts!

One of Pei Ming's arms was hung in a sling, and the other hand rubbed his chin. "Is it my imagination, or is Xuan Zhen even more sarcastic these days?"

"Hasn't he always been this bad? He's just too lazy to hide it now," Feng Xin responded.

Mu Qing rolled his eyes, and everyone pointed their fingers at him.

“Decorum!” they chided.

Mu Qing pointedly turned and left.

Quan Yizhen was in bandages from head to toe so he resembled a human-shaped zongzi.[2] Only the top of his head and his messy curly hair could be seen. His words were muffled and unclear when he said, “What do we do now? Who’s gonna do all the math?”

Everyone exchanged glances, cleared their throats, and quietly backed away. No one wanted to take on such a difficult and thankless task.

Seeing this, Pei Ming sighed. “If only Ling Wen were here. All else aside, no one can complain about the way she managed things. There’d be nothing to be afraid of, even with the Palace of Ling Wen reduced to ash—she knows the ins and outs of this mess of accounts like the back of her hand. I’m sure she would’ve gotten it sorted within a day.”

After struggling on this godforsaken mountain for so long, most of the officials shared the same sentiment deep down—they just didn’t dare say it out loud. However, now that someone had taken the initiative to voice it, they all began loudly agreeing.

“Yeah!”

“I’ll never say the Palace of Ling Wen is inefficient again!”

“I already hadn’t said that in a while…”

Just then, someone from outside came in to announce, “Everyone, Lord Rain Master has arrived!”

The heavenly officials’ faces brightened at this, and they immediately went out to greet her. Pei Ming’s expression was unreadable. He hesitated for a moment and ultimately chose not to go outside with them.

Another voice called out. “Your Highness! You’ve come too!”

Chapter 131:
Atop Mount Taicang, Thousands of Kinds of Dust Settle

IN AN INSTANT, the heavenly officials' expressions grew even more unreadable than Pei Ming's.

A white-clad cultivator acknowledged the greeting. His bearing was calm, relaxed, and graceful.

It was Xie Lian.

Every member of the group greeted him, their words and expressions extremely careful, polite, and courteous.

"Your Royal Highness…"

"Your Highness."

Xie Lian greeted everyone similarly politely and stepped forward with a gesture of welcome. "Lord Rain Master."

The Rain Master had arrived before the makeshift conference hut. She held the Guardian Steed's reins as she inclined her head to Xie Lian in greeting.

There were countless giant boxes of produce on the big black ox's back; they were the purpose of the Rain Master's visit. Apparently, these fruits and vegetables had the incredible effect of nurturing spiritual powers when consumed. When the heavenly officials were told of this, a group went over excitedly to divide up the bounty into shares.

Part of the crowd didn't move, however, and Xie Lian was in their number.

"I've brought something else for Your Highness," Lord Rain Master said.

Xie Lian smiled. "Ah, thank you in advance! What is it?"

The Rain Master reached into her sleeve and took out a small package wrapped with a band of white cloth. The moment she opened it, Xie Lian's eyes brightened.

“Thank you so much, Lord Rain Master! I’ve been searching everywhere!”

Feng Xin came over to look. “Rare fantastic silk!” he commented. “This is great—now you can finally fix that thing of yours!”

Xie Lian rummaged around in his sleeve and fumbled out a torn white silk band. “Yes, finally, we’ve found material to fix Ruoye!” he said joyously. “I’ll go patch it up right now!”

But Feng Xin stopped him. “Patch it up? You?! Forget it; what can *you* patch? Ask someone else to help you.” Then he turned his head and shouted, “Mu Qing! Come and get to work!”

“What? What are you trying to say?” Mu Qing asked coolly as he dragged his feet over. “Are you telling *me* to stitch it up?”

“Isn’t that your area of expertise?” Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing humphed. “And isn’t using people yours? Treating me like a servant you can order around again; tomorrow you’ll probably tell me to sweep the floor.”

Xie Lian laughed. “Never mind, never mind. I’ll do it myself.”

But Mu Qing had already taken the strips of white silk from his hands and, with a roll of his eyes, went to search for a needle and thread.

After that, Pei Ming came over to greet them as well. He had a mind to give the black ox a pat, but the ox loudly chomped his teeth and almost broke Pei Ming’s fingers the second he tried. Seeing he wasn’t welcome, he left in a hurry.

“Has General Pei’s arm still not recovered?” Lord Rain Master inquired.

“Not yet,” Xie Lian replied. “When he made that agreement with Rong Guang to use the sword Mingguang, he had to pay with an arm on top of an apology. In the end, Rong Guang’s resentment had dispersed enough that he didn’t follow through with collecting the limb. It left General Pei some face, but he was still badly injured.”

“I see,” Rain Master said. “No wonder General Pei looked so off.”

That’s definitely not *why he looks off,* Xie Lian thought.

Pei Ming simply could not get over the fact that the Rain Master had saved him time and time again at both Mount Tonglu and in the great fires of the Heavenly Capital. He was taking it very hard. He was a big man, a strong man, and thought that he dominated the heavens and the earth, and he couldn't bear to look even remotely bad in front of a woman—especially not a woman with whom he shared such a complex and difficult history. He could accept even Xuan Ji's behavior more easily than that. In any case, he couldn't let it go, and it bothered him most whenever he saw the Rain Master—*that* was why he looked off.

However, the Rain Master had no idea what all the fuss was about, so she always smiled at him politely in greeting. The two of them were on two completely different pages; it was inexplicably absurd.

"Oh, yes. Your Highness, how is Xuan Ji?" the Rain Master asked.

"Xuan Ji's locked up at the foot of the mountain," Xie Lian replied. "Do you want to go see her?"

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After the great battle, all the nefarious creatures across the land that had escaped their seals were temporarily detained in an interim dungeon set up at the foot of Mount Taicang. Xie Lian led the way, but they heard rough voices cursing up a storm before they even came within sight of the dungeon.

Pei Xiu and Banyue sat at the dungeon's entrance, both wearing blank expressions. There was a serious lack of people to help right now, so the two of them had been sent to assist the Upper Court by guarding the dungeon. Kemo was among those imprisoned within, and as they say, the eyes blaze especially red when enemies come face-to-face. He now spent his days lambasting them nonstop, hurling endless abuse. However, the two of them simply sat side by side like wooden dolls, pretending they couldn't understand what he was saying.

When Xie Lian and the Rain Master approached, they rose to their feet to greet them. "Your Highness, Lord Rain Master."

The Rain Master passed a box of produce to them, and Xie Lian said, “Thank you both for your hard work. Lord Rain Master wants to see Xuan Ji.”

Pei Xiu hesitated for a moment. “Xuan Ji…”

Xie Lian noticed his discomfort. “Is something the matter?”

The two entered the dungeon. When they arrived at the cell where Xuan Ji had been detained, they were both stunned. There was nothing there—all that remained was a ragged, torn red bridal robe.

“Xuan Ji dissipated last night,” Pei Xiu explained.

How incredible—Xuan Ji’s resentment had dispersed. Not long ago, the woman’s obsession had still been so deep that she had tried to choke Pei Ming to death and refused to let go.

“Perhaps she finally thought things through,” Xie Lian remarked.

Perhaps she thought through how she had become such a vindictive, despicable madwoman over the past centuries—so different from the person she once was, a heroic general and dignified lady of a prestigious house. Perhaps she thought through what she had lost and what she had gained. Then, gripped by shame and embarrassment, she probably didn’t have the face to think any further.

All this time, she had tried to change the heart of the man who had deserted her—tried to stir his feelings, tried to threaten his life. Now, finally, she realized the truth of the matter, and understood that there had never been a chance to turn things around. Not even from the very start.

To remain in this world, she’d relied on her vexation and her unyielding refusal to accept Pei Ming’s decision. The moment she thought things through, there was no longer any reason to stick around. It was all so meaningless when she finally thought about it.

The Rain Master sat down on the spot to perform a service for Xuan Ji’s passing. After all, Xuan Ji had been the only other person left from the fallen Kingdom of Yushi.

It would have been impolite of Xie Lian to disturb her, so he left her to it.

***

When he left, he saw that Pei Xiu and Banyue were snacking on the fruits the Rain Master had brought them. He went over to join them and took some fruit as well. He was going to crouch and eat with them when he suddenly sensed something. He whipped his head around to look.

Something had just shot through the tall bushes not far away.

He quickly tossed his fruit aside and shouted “Keep watch over here!” before dashing over.

The thing in the bushes realized it had been discovered and ran even faster. At first, Xie Lian could’ve caught up in eight steps, but it only took four for him to realize who he was chasing. Changing his mind, he slowed his pace and waited until they had fled for a while before he broke in from the side to block their path.

“Lady Jian Lan, do you plan on leaving without saying farewell?”

The other party was indeed Jian Lan. She’d been sneaking around with the fetus spirit cradled in her arms, and she jumped in surprise when Xie Lian appeared out of nowhere.

“You!”

The blanched fetus spirit she carried bared its teeth like it wanted to attack, but Jian Lan held it back.

“Are you here to stop me?”

Not wanting to alarm her, Xie Lian said, “Don’t be nervous; I just wanted to give you something.” He took out an item. “Your son Cuocuo’s grudge is rather strong, and it needs to be kept under control. Although purification is already underway, your cultivation isn’t as high as his—it’s hard to guarantee there won’t be accidents. You’ll need this to help.”

It was a protection charm that Xie Lian had made himself. To prove there were no tricks embedded, he even demonstrated how to use it. As Jian Lan watched, she did start to relax, for this thing truly was useful. After some hesitation, she took it.

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me,” Xie Lian said. “All I ask is that when you use it, shout ‘Your Highness, please watch over me’ three times. That way, it will be counted under my palace’s name.”

“…”

Jian Lan took a few steps, then paused for a moment. In the end, she couldn’t restrain her curiosity and turned to ask, “You’re not stopping me? Why?”

Xie Lian had been waiting for her to look back, and instead of answering, he asked her a question of his own. “Lady Jian Lan, why must you go at all? Feng Xin said he would take care of you both, and he will keep his word.”

Although Jian Lan’s expression flickered, in the end, she only sighed. “I know he will. But forget it, it’s for the best. I don’t want to be with him anymore.”

Xie Lian was a little taken aback. “Do you…not love him at all anymore?”

Jian Lan sat on the roadside, probably tired from running. “This has nothing to do with love at this point. I don’t want to force him to tie himself to us.”

Xie Lian sat by her side and contemplated for a moment. “Feng Xin really loves you, without a doubt. He was so completely exhausted back then, but he refused to let you go.”

As if she’d just recalled something from a faraway past, Jian Lan laughed. “Since you mention it, I remember now. He was still a little stupid back in those days, working long hours to make enough money to buy me for an entire night. But he’d just bring over a stool and sit next to me; he did nothing but sit and chat with me the whole time. Everyone thought he was a joke—what a laugh!”

Xie Lian smiled. “You see, I told you he really loves you.”

However, Jian Lan withdrew her smile. “You say that, but it’s all so far in the past. Even if what we had back then was love, it doesn’t mean it’ll last today. I’m not interested in being a charity case and a nuisance.”

“Why would he consider either of you a nuisance?” Xie Lian asked. “Don’t you know the kind of person Feng Xin is?”

“Your Royal Highness, you don’t live the common life, so of course you’d think things are that simple. He wouldn’t consider us a nuisance right away, and he wouldn’t let it show on the surface. But all that’s subject to change as things drag out over time. If I’d wanted to find him, I would’ve done so a long time ago. It’s not like Temples of Nan Yang are hard to find; they were everywhere at one point. But I still didn’t want to.

“He ascended and became so impressive and glorious. But we’d already become ghosts, so what would have been the point in seeking him out? Wouldn’t carrying two ghosts around just cause trouble for a heavenly official?

“I dumped him at my most beautiful, all proud and dignified. I think that was for the best. That way, I’d always look like that in his memories, instead of like this—caked in heavy, gaudy makeup, with crow’s feet around my eyes.” She pinched at her own face. “If he really recognized us officially and had to look at this face every day, and Cuocuo like he is… he’d only get more and more exhausted the longer we dragged him down, and more and more annoyed. Eventually, we’d be nothing but a nuisance. So why turn my own story into a tragedy? Why bother?”

As she spoke, the fetus spirit slithered its wet tongue all over her face. Although it was disgusting, there was also something cute about it, in a mischievous way. But most people would probably just see it as disgusting and could never come to accept it.

Jian Lan petted her son’s bald head. “Anyway, Cuocuo is enough for me. Who didn’t make promises when they were young? Swearing on the mountains and the seas, talking of affection, of love, of forever. The longer I hang around in the world, the more I understand that ‘forever’ is impossible. It’s *never* going to be possible. No one can truly achieve it. Experiencing ‘everlasting love’ once was enough; I don’t believe in it anymore.

“Feng Xin is a good man. It’s just…it’s been too long,” she said helplessly. “Everything’s changed, so it’s best to let it go.”

Xie Lian listened silently, not speaking a word.

But in his heart, he said, *No.*

Deep down inside of him, a voice said, *Forever does exist. There's one person who can achieve it. I believe.*

***

Jian Lan still took Cuocuo and left in the end.

Xie Lian saw the Rain Master off after she finished the deliverance service for Xuan Ji, then he returned to Mount Taicang. He'd meant to tell Feng Xin that Jian Lan had left, but he couldn't find him. As he was searching for him in the rowdy crowd, he heard someone shout.

"Great timing, Tai Hua! Are you free? Come help us figure this out!"

They were still trying to find someone, *anyone*, to do the books, and Lang Qianqiu was desperate to get away. "Don't bring that stack of papers here—I've got things to do!" he responded from afar. "Go find someone else!"

Xie Lian sighed, wondering if he should go over and take a crack at the books. Unexpectedly, he had only taken a few steps when he heard a voice from behind.

"Mas— Sta— Your Highness."

Xie Lian turned his head to see Lang Qianqiu standing right behind him.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Of course," Xie Lian replied.

Thus, he and Lang Qianqiu walked out of the giant hut, that sad excuse for a palace. As they went, Xie Lian asked, "How's Guzi doing? Is he all right?"

Lang Qianqiu chuckled helplessly, sounding a little bitter. "I don't know if I'd say he's 'all right.' The kid asks me for his dad every day—it's pretty sad. I could only…gather a few bits of the Green Ghost's soul. I put them in a lamp, but now the kid shows up daily, hugging the thing and asking when the soul inside will grow bigger! I honestly…"

At the sight of his gloomy, dispirited face, Xie Lian could understand his feelings. Why did he have to do something like this for Qi Rong, who had murdered his entire family? Xie Lian unconsciously reached out to pat Lang Qianqiu's shoulder, but he held back as he remembered what he himself had done in Yong'an.

"You've worked hard," he said gently. "What did you want to speak with me about today?"

After some hesitation, Lang Qianqiu reached into his robes, took something out, and passed it to Xie Lian. "This."

Xie Lian's breath hitched as soon as he saw what it was: an exquisite, luminous, small, smooth, crimson-red coral pearl.

His voice trembled as he said, "This is…?!"

"This coral pearl was a secret treasure of the founding father of Yong'an," Lang Qianqiu said.

Only when Xie Lian heard that did he realize this wasn't the one tied at the end of Hua Cheng's braid but the one he had once given to Lang Ying. It wasn't Hua Cheng's. Although Xie Lian felt a little disappointed, he still took the pearl.

"The founding father once said that the man who gave him this pearl was someone who had helped him," Lang Qianqiu continued. "He was his savior, and a very good man."

"…"

"But all the same, that man lost everything due to his actions," Lang Qianqiu went on. "The founding father said he didn't regret what he'd done; he'd had no choice. Still, when he thought about it after the fact, he still felt that he'd wronged the man."

"And then…?" Xie Lian asked.

"And then," Lang Qianqiu said, "I saw the bead at the end of Crimson Rain Sought Flower's braid that day at the Heavenly Capital. The more I looked at it, the more I thought it resembled the one Father left me. I heard General Xuan Zhen and the others talking later and learned that those pearls were actually a pair, and that they belonged to you. So I came to ask—is this yours?"

Xie Lian paused for a long moment before nodding slowly. “It’s mine. It’s one of a pair that my parents gave me when I was young.”

Lang Qianqiu scratched his head. “Then…I’m giving it back to you.”

He still didn’t know how to address Xie Lian, and after he returned the pearl, he dawdled for a bit before leaving without a word. Xie Lian just stood there, clutching the red coral pearl tightly in the heart of his palm.

It had been over eight hundred years. After so many twists and turns, one half of the pair of crimson coral pearl earrings had returned to him. It belonged to him, but also to *him*.

The other pearl should’ve been there as well. They should’ve been able to complete the set.

Right then, Feng Xin’s loud, overjoyed voice came from the foot of the mountain. “Your Highness! Everyone! Come quick!”

Chapter 132:
How My Lord Aches for the Flower, How I Ache for My Lord

XIE LIAN TUCKED the pearl away and went to investigate the commotion.

Several heavenly officials emerged from the giant crude hut, asking, "What's going on with General Nan Feng?"

"Look who I've captured!" Feng Xin called out.

He crashed out of the woods, dragging a black-clad individual by the arm. The heavenly officials were shocked as he hurried over.

"Ling Wen!"

The one whom Feng Xin had seized was indeed Ling Wen.

"Just as you predicted, Ling Wen returned to try to steal the Brocade Immortal!" Feng Xin told Xie Lian.

After removing the cursed shackles, Xie Lian's spiritual powers had increased explosively to the point where he was practically Jun Wu's equal—the Brocade Immortal could no longer exert control over him. Ling Wen had gone missing during the great battle and was nowhere to be found afterward; she had been turned into a budaoweng doll by Hua Cheng, but the spell on her was set to release automatically after a certain amount of time. Xie Lian figured she would likely return to steal the Brocade Immortal, so he took off the robe and asked Ghost City to spread the word. Sure enough, Ling Wen took the bait.

Even as an apprehended fugitive, Ling Wen still didn't seem panicked as she was taken to the conference hut. The moment Pei Ming came in, he grasped her firmly by the shoulders and sat her down in front of a table.

"Ling Wen—we've finally found you! You must pay for your sins!" he admonished, his voice dark.

"…"

Dozens of heavenly officials surrounded her. Their eyes were like those of starving wolves and bloodthirsty tigers, their expressions practically savage. Ling Wen finally felt a twinge of trepidation.

"…What are you all planning?"

Thump! A towering stack of reports and scrolls was thrown before her. It was nearly the height of a full-grown man, and so heavy that the table and chairs shook.

Pei Ming slapped the scrolls with a resounding *thwack*. "These. Take care of them."

"…"

Although Ling Wen breathed a sigh of relief, it was quickly followed by bafflement. Before she could even fully exhale, there was another round of noise. *Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump!*

Many thumps later, dozens more stacks of documents and reports had crashed down around her, each looming high overhead. Ling Wen was completely surrounded. Dozens of heavenly officials babbled at her from the cracks between the stacks.

"We've been waiting for you for days now! Hurry and help us figure this out!"

"Take care of these too."

"Remember to fill out the missing sections."

"You better get it done within the hour!"

Ling Wen was speechless. "…"

After a grueling battle that lasted a full day and night, Ling Wen was finally released from the temporary conference hall. The mess of scrolls and reports had been taken care of—every single one had been categorized and organized neatly, and everything was in order. The heavenly officials cheered as they received their palaces' accounts, and each scurried away to double-check. On the other hand, Ling Wen's face was ashen. The dark circles under her eyes had disappeared while she was on the run, but they had now returned with a vengeance.

Once everyone had finished checking her work, there was much rejoicing.

“Noble Jie is the most efficient of us all, that’s for sure!” Pei Ming praised. “Now everything’s squared away!”

“Everything’s in order! Many thanks to Lord Ling Wen!”

Amidst all the praise from the crowd of heavenly officials, Ling Wen could do nothing but chuckle dryly—such was the fate of a criminal. “It’s nothing, it’s nothing.”

There were still many heavenly officials in the hall with accounts that needed sorting. They hadn’t been as quick to shove their work on Ling Wen, but at the sight of this display they could sit still no longer, and she was surrounded once more.

“Umm, actually, I’ve got some books that I forgot to give you, my lord. I was wondering if you might take a look…”

Ling Wen was, yet again, speechless.

Xie Lian had been crouching outside the temporary conference hall eating a steamed bun, and after he finished, he brushed his hands clean and finally rescued Ling Wen from her suffering.

“Everyone, let’s figure this out later. Let Ling Wen catch her breath first.”

No one had cared when he spoke up in the past, but things were different now. Several people responded, *“Your Highness is right,”* and didn’t dare say another word. Ling Wen, her eyes closed and a hand over her forehead, sat in her chair waiting for the other heavenly officials to exit. Only once the conference hall was deserted did she turn to Xie Lian.

“Congratulations, Your Highness—your spiritual powers have returned. What a good strategy; now, you can even count ghosts among your worshippers and make them obey your orders. How incredible.”

“They’re not my worshippers,” Xie Lian replied. “They’re just friends from Ghost City. I asked them to help out.”

Ling Wen nodded, her face full of understanding.

A moment later, Xie Lian spoke again. “Ling Wen, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you.”

“Your Highness can go ahead,” Ling Wen said.

“San Lang—I mean Hua-chengzhu,” Xie Lian started. “He wore the Brocade Immortal you created, but it didn’t work on him. Do you know why?”

“So it’s *this* question,” Ling Wen said. “I thought Your Highness already knew.”

Xie Lian blinked.

“Tell me.”

Ling Wen shook out her sleeves and straightened her posture. “Your Highness, you’ve heard the legend of the Brocade Immortal, right?”

“I’ve heard it,” Xie Lian replied. “You forged it yourself.”

“You could say that,” Ling Wen said. “Although I never imagined the resentment gathered on the robe would transform it into an evil being. But I did kill Bai Jing to hasten the Kingdom of Xuli’s collapse. That’s not untrue.”

Xie Lian listened intently as Ling Wen continued.

“The robe made the rounds throughout the Mortal Realm and passed through countless hands. So many people chose to use it to murder, to harm, to deceive. While they could theoretically dispel some of its resentment by doing so, Bai Jing isn’t that kind of person.

“He didn’t like being used by those people; he hated them. But his resentment wasn’t provoked when he met recipients who were more like him, and a special sort of giver—instead, they’d make him happy.”

“And how are those special givers and recipients different?” Xie Lian asked.

“You put the Brocade Immortal on Crimson Rain Sought Flower, but there was not a single trace of malicious intent or desire to harm in your heart,” Ling Wen answered. “And you trust him with your whole being. Crimson Rain Sought Flower is the same when it comes to you—no, in fact, he’s even more so. But what really made Bai Jing resonate with him was that he would already do anything you asked of him without hesitation—it didn’t matter if he was wearing the Brocade Immortal or not. And that includes dying for you.”

“…”

“That was also how I managed to guess that the boy next to you was Crimson Rain Sought Flower,” Ling Wen said. “Although I don’t know much about the affairs between you two, I figured there wasn’t a single other person who could fit the bill.”

“Why’s that?” Xie Lian asked.

Ling Wen raised her hand and pointed. “Your Highness, what’s that around your neck?”

Taken aback, Xie Lian moved on reflex to cover it with his hand.

“I’ve seen similar trinkets before,” Ling Wen said. “Some unusual ghosts give their ashes to their lovers.”

Countless scrolls and reports had passed through the Palace of Ling Wen, so it wasn’t strange that she had seen such things before. Truth be told, Xie Lian had already guessed the truth of this crystal-clear ring…but he still squeezed it tight when he heard Ling Wen say it out loud.

“Something like that is rare and precious indeed,” Ling Wen said. “But because it’s too beautiful a gesture, it often ends in tragedy. Thus, the concept left a rather strong impression in my mind.”

“What do you mean, ‘it often ends in tragedy’?” Xie Lian asked.

“To be so deeply in love that it blinds your reason… Giving someone an object tied to your life can have many tragic or terrifying consequences,” Ling Wen said. “A pure heart is made to be trampled. All those keepsakes made of ashes…some were stolen by interlopers, some were shattered by their recipients. Basically, none of the stories ended well. Although, Your Highness is an exception; you’ve kept it almost flawlessly.”

After a long silence, Xie Lian said, “You said ‘more like him’ and ‘resonate with him.’ So was General Bai Jing like that as well?”

Ling Wen smiled lightly. “How else could I have deceived him?”

“It wasn’t really deception though, was it?” Xie Lian said. “I’m sure you knew I was intentionally spreading the word, but you still took the bait.”

“Come now, it’s a good defensive device,” Ling Wen said.

"If you only thought of it as a defensive device, you wouldn't have taken such risks to steal it in the first place. And after you failed, you still took it to Mount Tonglu."

"What else was there to do besides take it to Mount Tonglu?" Ling Wen said apathetically. "I was already exposed, wasn't I? Your Highness was the one who caught me red-handed."

"Honestly, you could have covered the matter up with excuses," Xie Lian said. "Just spread a few bribes around; you might've been demoted or had merits deducted, but you wouldn't have ended up a fugitive. My point is…you wanted to help General Bai Jing become a supreme, which would allow him to return to his senses. Right?"

Ling Wen let out a small laugh. "Your Highness, don't say it like I would do anything for him. I'm the cold-blooded type who doesn't truly love anyone, after all. Why would I do something like that?"

"Is that so?"

"Let it be so."

***

After cleaning up the ruins of the Royal Holy Temple's Crown Prince Summit, Xie Lian erected a simple cottage to use as a temporary residence. It was farther away from the conference hall, more remote. When they needed him, he'd go over to help; when they didn't, he'd stay quietly in the cottage by himself.

Several days passed, and Mu Qing finally finished repairing Ruoye and came to deliver it. The moment Xie Lian opened the door, something pounced at him, and his vision was filled with white. He raised his hand to yank the thing off. Ruoye began to wind and swivel again, like it was showing off its beautiful body after being reborn.

"Don't twist around like that right after you were repaired. Be careful, or you'll tear yourself again," Xie Lian admonished.

The moment Mu Qing heard, he had to interject. "How is that possible? What robes of yours have ever torn after I patched them up for you?”

“That’s true,” Xie Lian said.

He caught Ruoye, which was twisted like seaweed, and carefully checked it over. It had been stitched up extremely well; there was practically no trace it had ever been torn. “Your craftsmanship is still amazing,” he praised.

“A compliment for something like this won’t make me happy,” Mu Qing said. “I’m only doing it once; there won’t be a next time. Never again.”

You’re clearly super proud of your work… Xie Lian thought.

After grumbling a while more, Mu Qing said, “All right, I’ve done my job. I’m out of here. I’m in the middle of getting some personnel and other stuff taken care of at the Palace of Xuan Zhen.”

“You’re leaving too?” Xie Lian asked. “All right, I’ll go over to help in a bit. Remember to give me a shout when you leave so I can see you off.”

After capturing Ling Wen and forcibly enlisting her to organize all the missing and messed-up accounts, the heavenly officials finally decided to rebuild the Heavenly Capital. That meant the temporary conference hall at Mount Taicang could now be left behind.

Neither dismissing nor agreeing to anything, Mu Qing waved and made to leave. After only a few steps, he stopped and looked back.

“Are you…going to stay on Mount Taicang?”

Xie Lian nodded. “Yes.”

After a moment of hesitation, Mu Qing asked, “Why don’t you come with us instead?”

“Nah. I’m waiting for someone,” said Xie Lian, smiling.

“You can wait in the Upper Court of the new Heavenly Capital,” Mu Qing reasoned.

Xie Lian shook his head. “I think he’ll come here first when he returns, so I’ll be able to meet him the moment he arrives. If not, he might go to Thousand Lights Temple in Ghost City, and it’s not far from here. It’s much more convenient to get there from here than from the new Heavenly Capital.”

Mu Qing had held his tongue for a long while now. Wearing a complicated expression, he finally asked, “…You really believe he’ll come back?”

Like it was an absolute certainty, Xie Lian replied, “Of course.”

***

People came like the tide and then left like the tide. Lonesome Mount Taicang was quiet and deserted once more.

There used to be an enormous forest of maple trees there. The forest had been razed by countless fires back in the day, but after nearly a thousand years, it had been reborn. Although they were no longer the same trees Xie Lian had leapt through to train once upon a time, the landscape was the same.

Xie Lian often strolled the maple forest by himself. There was an entire mountain’s worth of red maples, consuming the world around him like a passionate wildfire. It made him feel as if he were in a giant, warm embrace.

He had whiled away the days of his life on his own for over eight hundred years, so he was used to it. If there was work to be done, he’d go down the mountain to answer some prayers and collect some junk. If there wasn’t, he’d plant some vegetables and do some cooking.

Days spent on his own, just like this, used to be the most normal thing in the world for Xie Lian. But strangely, passing the days in solitude had somehow become very difficult. It was a long time before he got acclimated to it again.

Perhaps when a person has only ever eaten bitter fruit, they become used to the taste. But if given a taste of sweetness, it’d bring a frown to their face to return to their original fare with the memory of something better, however fleeting it was.

Back when Xie Lian passed his endless days in simplicity and quietude, he often secretly hoped someone would come looking for him—to seek him out to chat or for assistance. Whatever the reason, at least it would've been a sign of life.

But he didn't like the idea as much anymore. Every time he heard a knock upon his door, his heart would jolt in happiness and fill with hope—but when he dashed over to open it, the person standing outside was never the one he was waiting for.

Sometimes it was Feng Xin, sometimes it was Mu Qing, and other times it was Shi Qingxuan. Sometimes it was some of the many ghosts from Ghost City, there to "offer respects to His Elderliness."

Everyone was welcome. It was simply that none of them were the one he was waiting for.

***

During the first month, Xie Lian hauled over several flowering trees to plant by the cottage's entrance, in hopes of beautifying the surroundings a little and hiding the crudeness of the dilapidated building. He thought they might be in bloom when Hua Cheng returned.

During the second month, Xie Lian tore down the cottage and rebuilt it from scratch. He also weeded the entirety of Mount Taicang. Otherwise, Hua Cheng would surely send people over to help him clean when he came back and saw this mess.

During the third month, the flowering trees blossomed. Cherry red blanketed the branches. Xie Lian stood beneath their canopy, gazing upward. As he enjoyed the sight, he thought, *The flowers are in full bloom—he should be home soon.*

During the fourth month, he fixed up all the paths. That way, Hua Cheng could hike the mountain and find him faster when he returned.

During the fifth month, Feng Xin and Mu Qing came to visit again. They asked if he wanted to leave the cottage for a bit to take a walk outside. Xie Lian invited them for a meal, and they ran off.

During the sixth month, the flowering period ended.

…

He waited and waited, waited and waited. Xie Lian wasn't anxious. He didn't break down, nor did he weep in agony. Instead, he only became more and more composed, more and more patient.

And as he thought, he realized, who *hadn't* experienced long years of being alone?

Hua Cheng had waited for him for over eight hundred years. What did it matter if he waited for Hua Cheng for eight hundred more?

It could be a thousand years, ten thousand years, and he would still wait. He would still keep waiting.

It was fine…it had only been a year, after all.

***

One day, as usual, Xie Lian had collected a large pile of junk. He heaped it high on a cart pulled by an ox—both of which Xie Lian had recently saved for and purchased—and guided it up the mountain.

When he had driven halfway up the path that passed through the maple forest, Xie Lian turned and saw some glimmering lights in the night sky. As he stared, it dawned on him—they were Blessings Lanterns of Everlasting Light.

"So, it's the Shangyuan Festival today," he murmured to himself.

Right now, the heavenly officials of the Upper Court were probably having another lantern battle. Despite himself, Xie Lian pulled the reins and stopped where he was to watch the Blessings Lanterns in a daze.

As he did, he recalled that he and Hua Cheng had first met during Shangyuan.

That year, a small child with a battered, filthy face squeezed through the swarming crowd and looked down from the city wall. The seventeen-year-old Crown Prince of Xianle was glowing. He looked up and saw a figure falling, and without thinking, leapt into the air.

The auspicious Shangyuan Festival on the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, and the awe-inspiring first impression that had led to centuries of pining…

A smile hung on Xie Lian's face as he reflected on the past. In the end, Hua Cheng wasn't the only one who'd fallen.

Turning around, Xie Lian bowed his head and continued up the mountain path. The cart clattered and creaked as it rolled along, and as he went, the path seemed to get brighter. There was light coming from somewhere far ahead.

Xie Lian lifted his head once more, his eyes widening.

The light was from lanterns.

Like millions of fish swimming through gorges to the sea, countless Blessings Lanterns drifted languidly from the mountain peak. They glowed and shimmered brilliantly against the black night. A magnificent, beautiful dream had brightened his path.

Xie Lian had seen this sight before. Now that he was seeing it again, his breath and heartbeat nearly stopped. He came to a bend on the mountain path, and the wheels spun as the cart turned. The little dilapidated cottage he had built came into view.

And someone was there.

A man clad in red stood before the crooked little cottage. His figure was tall and slender, and a silver scimitar hung at his waist. He had his back to Xie Lian while he lifted and sent off the last Blessings Lantern, which took to the skies on a meandering path.

Frozen in his seat, Xie Lian wondered if he was still in a dream, wondered if this was a hallucination. The cart's wheels turned, bringing him closer and closer. The man spun around, and in Xie Lian's sight, his face grew clearer and clearer.

Three thousand Blessings Lanterns rose into the night behind the man who had turned to gaze at him. Robes redder than maple, skin as white as snow. A face so handsome that one couldn't bear to stare for long. There was still a wildness about him and a feral aura on his brow—and a pride that could never be felled.

Although he wore a black eyepatch, his remaining eye was as bright as the stars above as he gazed unblinkingly at Xie Lian.

Xie Lian scrambled down.

There were no words. They both started walking toward each other.

One step, another step, each one faster than the last. Then, finally, they started running.

As he ran forward, tears fell and were left behind.

In his heart, Xie Lian swore it once more: *I believe.*

He believed this man would die for him again and again and would be reborn for him over and over; even if he fell into the depths of hell, he would break through the abyss in the name of his faith.

Last time, they spent eight hundred years running toward each other.

This time, it only took an instant to fall into each other's embrace.

Chapter 133:
By the Heaven Official's Blessing, No Paths Are Bound

"CONGRATS, CONGRATS!"

"Congratulations, Your Highness!"

The newly built Puqi Shrine was bustling and lively; people came and went. Xie Lian traveled along the long tables packed with guests to deliver bowl after bowl of hot, steamy noodles, soups with oil that glistened like gold, and mouthwatering snow-white rice. His movements flowed like water.

Even as he ran hither and thither swamped with various tasks, Xie Lian still had to greet incoming guests. He managed to spare a moment to say, "Thank you, please have a seat!"

The original Puqi Shrine had unfortunately collapsed in a brawl, but it was now rebuilt.

The once-dilapidated little shrine was much more sumptuous this time; a new courtyard had even been added. Neither Xie Lian nor Hua Cheng had handled the reconstruction—rather, it had been spearheaded by the residents of Puqi Village. On the day when Xie Lian fled, they had rummaged through the wreckage and found a box full of gold bars. Naturally, they were the ones that had been stuffed into his donation box day after day by Quan Yizhen.

The villagers were almost scared out of their wits; they had never seen so much gold. After they came to their senses, the village head used a portion of it to rebuild Puqi Shrine. They didn't dare to touch the rest of it and kept it safe for Xie Lian until he returned.

Thus, when Xie Lian returned with Hua Cheng, they were greeted with enthusiastic cries of "Daozhang" and "Xiao-Hua"—and also by a brand-new shrine and a box heavy with gold bars.

Xie Lian had planned to return the gold bars to Quan Yizhen, but Quan Yizhen would allow no such thing, refusing them left and right until Hua Cheng told him in no uncertain terms that, *"If you don't take those bars* *back, you can forget about learning how to properly nurse a ghost's soul."* Only then did the child settle down and break his bad habit of blindly stuffing gold bars into people's hands.

After making their greetings, the group of heavenly officials led by Mu Qing cautiously crossed into the yard. The moment they got a full look at the shrine, their words stuck in their throats.

Gaudy.

Too gaudy!

The bright, clashing celebratory reds and greens weren't even the worst of it, nor was the extremely exaggerated divine statue painted in a rainbow of colors. The worst thing of all was the establishment plaque.

What in the world was even written—or drawn—on that plaque?

There naturally needed to be a celebration when a new shrine was established, but this shrine's taste was terrible in every sense of the word—especially that ghastly establishment plaque. It was quite difficult for anyone to force compliments past their lips; all the congratulatory niceties they had prepared had been completely forgotten.

Xie Lian, on the other hand, didn't mind the decor at all; he even thought it was rather nice. At least it wasn't a dilapidated building that was constantly teetering on the brink of collapse.

"Please have a seat, won't you?" he offered again.

The group of heavenly officials didn't look like they wanted to sit; they probably had only stopped by to congratulate him and quickly show their faces. After delivering their gifts, they left in a hurry.

Xie Lian turned to Mu Qing. "Why did they leave in such a rush?"

"Do you even need to ask?" Mu Qing said.

"Well, yeah."

"Then why don't you go ask your dear San Lang?" Mu Qing spat crankily.

When Hua Cheng came back, the first one to know was Xie Lian. Second to know were the gods of the Upper Court, who hadn't even warmed their seats yet in the new Heavenly Capital. On the day of the

Shangyuan Festival, they had worked so hard to put together a Battle of the Lanterns…which was abruptly obliterated by Hua Cheng's casual wave of three thousand lanterns, the same move he'd pulled at the Mid-Autumn Banquet. In addition, the heavenly bell had been tolling nonstop ever since that night. The entire Upper Court echoed with its ceaseless reverberating gongs, as if it were reminding them that the Nightmare of the Heavens had returned!

And right now, the Nightmare stood before them; no normal heavenly official would dare approach. However, they still wanted to get in Xie Lian's good graces so they could beg Hua Cheng to show them some mercy in the future. After all, the gossip about the relationship between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian in the Upper Court was already fairly lurid with no need for exaggeration.

When he heard about this, Xie Lian recalled how Hua Cheng had demanded the Upper Court proclaim his heroism for an entire year. "Cheeky," he said with a laugh.

"This is not just a matter of *cheekiness*!" Mu Qing scolded. "Tell him to lay off a little—it's getting out of control. That bell is so noisy that everyone's on edge, and the Upper Court can't function with it constantly tolling. It keeps falling off the tower and crashing onto people. The Heavenly Capital has finally been rebuilt; don't let it be destroyed again by something like that."

"All right," Xie Lian said. "I'll tell him in a bit. While we're here, wanna try some food?" He pointed at the rice, noodles, and soups on the tables in the yard, then added, "I didn't make it."

Rejection was written all over his cold expression when Mu Qing heard the first half, but his face returned to normal when he heard the last part. Right then, Feng Xin arrived. He entered the yard just in time to brush past several other junior officials who were about to leave.

After the junior officials greeted him, they began to whisper amongst themselves.

"It's General Nan Yang."

"It's him. It's so sad, his wife and son ran off with some guy…"

Veins bulged violently on Feng Xin’s forehead as he roared out curses at them. “What the fuck?! Aren’t you guys sick of this?! How many months have you been yapping about it?! Also—it’s just ‘ran off,’ not ‘ran off with some guy’! Stop fucking spreading false rumors!”

The gossipy junior officials were quickly scared away. Mu Qing stood to the side with his hands tucked in his sleeves.

“You shouldn’t have bothered to clarify. Now it just sounds even more embarrassing.”

Outraged, Feng Xin seized a broom and threw it over. Mu Qing caught it easily and snorted.

“Stale moves. You can’t use that trick on me anymore.”

Before Feng Xin could yell some more, Xie Lian walked over and stuffed another broom in his hands.

“Oh good, then how about both of you help me sweep the yard? We set off some firecrackers earlier, so the ground is covered in red scraps. Thanks. You can train some idioms if you get bored, okay?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both struck speechless.

An hour later, the sound of rowdy human voices approached from a distance. The gathered guests looked outside, and after a short while, a large and boisterous crowd of people poured into the yard of Puqi Shrine.

“Is it here?”

“It’s here! Oho, and it’s pretty impressive too.”

“There’s really rice—so much rice!”

“And meat!”

The temple grounds which Feng Xin and Mu Qing had just swept were immediately made filthy again by the giant crowd of muddy feet. Eyes wide, Mu Qing gripped his broom, feeling as though he’d been given fleas.

“…What’s with those beggars?”

A man with messy hair and dirty clothes was leading the crowd of beggars—it was Shi Qingxuan. He hobbled and hopped over to Xie Lian, putting his hands together in courtesy.

“Your Highness, I’ve come to bother you! So, how about it? Does our agreement still stand?”

Xie Lian laughed. “Of course it stands! Everyone is very welcome. Please have a seat, have a seat.”

“Isn’t this too many people?” Mu Qing wondered.

“No!” Shi Qingxuan said. “All the amazing people who helped guard the human array at the royal capital last year are here now.”

When they were guarding the human array, Shi Qingxuan had promised them all that everyone would be treated to chicken legs after the deed was done, and that all would be welcome. With so many people missing in action after their grand battle, the chicken leg treat was never delivered. However, they could finally fulfill the promise today by serving up bowl after bowl of noodle soup with chicken legs.

"Everyone, no need to hold yourselves back today! *Let's eat!*" Shi Qingxuan called out.

The cheering beggars crowded inside, filling the yard from the tables to the ground. They hugged enormous bowls close as they ate, slurping and slurping, chomping and chomping.

Suddenly, someone spoke up. "Wait, something's wrong. I sense evil qi!"

The crowd turned their heads and saw that the complaint had been voiced by Heaven's Eye and company.

Xie Lian felt his head ache. "Why did you guys come?"

"We helped out too, so why shouldn't we come?" Heaven's Eye raised his bowl high, his expression serious. "Everyone! Listen to me—I am definitely not wrong! There's evil qi in the food! It's highly dubious, very suspicious! Put your bowls down, quickly!"

No one even acknowledged him. The crowd of beggars had already finished eating their first round, and they raised their empty bowls. "Seconds!"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing had been fighting with their brooms as they swept the yard clean of the red scraps left over from the firecrackers, but when they saw everyone eating with such contentment and satisfaction, they each sat down and picked up a bowl.

"Why will none of you listen to reason?!" Heaven's Eye exclaimed furiously.

He got up, ready to go check the kitchen, but Shi Qingxuan held him back.

"Honestly, Daozhang, you're overthinking things. This is Crimson Rain Sought Flower's territory; it's normal to sense nefarious qi. Are you really that concerned? Fine, I'll go take a look. Just sit there and don't get too riled up."

And then he rose to his feet and walked to the kitchen, lifting the curtains to peek.

"You see, what's there to be suspicious about…"

“Wait, I’ll go look too…” Xie Lian said.

When he, Shi Qingxuan, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing poked their heads inside, they were stunned.

Inside the kitchen, a hulking boar butcher was hacking at the cutting board like mad; they’d have assumed he was chopping up humans if it hadn’t been for all the pork legs hanging behind him. A fire was lit under a giant pot that sat to one side of the kitchen, and within the pot a long-necked rooster spirit was scrubbing himself and having the time of his life. But when he noticed that new people had seen him bathing, he screamed and covered his chest with his hands.

Utterly flummoxed, Xie Lian hurried inside to whisper, “Didn’t I say you couldn’t do this?”

The rooster spirit crowed in laughter and slapped his chest. “Granduncle! We took a bath before we got here, we’re very clean!” he promised. “Besides, this broth has longevity-boosting effects; eating it won’t harm anyone! It can be consumed with total peace of mind!”

“…”

Shi Qingxuan silently dropped the curtains. Feng Xin and Mu Qing flung away their bowls, sputtering as they did.

“I’d rather *you* do the cooking!”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, feeling both amused and woeful. “They were so adamant about helping, I couldn’t say no. They’re doing this out of the goodness of their hearts.”

Right then, Heaven’s Eye came over, for he found their sneaking around too suspicious to ignore. Xie Lian quickly stopped him, afraid that he’d start another riot if he saw the boar butcher and the rest.

“Can I help you?” Xie Lian asked.

Yet unexpectedly, Heaven’s Eye hadn’t come to check out the kitchen—instead, he went straight for Xie Lian.

“That’s weird…” he mumbled in confusion, circling Xie Lian a few times.

“What is?” Xie Lian asked.

Heaven’s Eye was visibly puzzled. “This isn’t right, Xie-daozhang. Why has the evil qi on you intensified?”

“…” Xie Lian lightly cleared his throat.

Mu Qing humphed. “Of course it’ll get worse if he’s hanging around a Ghost King all day.”

“No,” Heaven’s Eye replied. “Even then, it shouldn’t be like *this*.”

“Like what?” Feng Xin asked.

After much hesitation, he decided to be blunt. “Why is the evil qi… *internal*? It’s…it’s coming from inside your body.”

“…”

“You must’ve suffered something truly torturous. What did you do? Why are you this unwell?”

“…”

Xie Lian couldn’t even cough anymore. His entire face was so red it was about to burst.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing didn’t understand at first, but once they figured it out, they turned silently to stare at Xie Lian.

“…”

Shi Qingxuan was the only one who couldn’t wrap his head around it. “What is it? What happened? What’s going on? Your Highness, are you really sick? Does Crimson Rain Sought Flower know? Is he not taking good care of you?!”

No, no, no. Xie Lian was like this *because* Hua Cheng had taken care of him so thoroughly!

“Um. Actually. No. Don’t…I think…why don’t you…hmm…” Xie Lian mumbled haltingly.

A mess of images filled up his mind, and a jumbled pile of meaningless, confused words kept falling from his mouth. This was only interrupted when his back bumped into someone’s chest. An arm wearing a silver vambrace circled his waist, and a familiar voice spoke with an obvious grin.

"I think that all of you should return to your seats, eat your food, and stop worrying about anything else. How's that?"

Considering the current situation, Xie Lian really didn't know whether he should feel relieved or even more awkward.

"San Lang!" he exclaimed.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing's expressions got very complicated the moment they saw Hua Cheng emerge, but they couldn't really say anything in front of Xie Lian.

Only Shi Qingxuan persisted, asking very seriously, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, have you checked out His Highness's body lately?"

Xie Lian slapped his forehead, desperately hoping Shi Qingxuan wouldn't ask any more questions. Just then, the crowd of beggars started complaining loudly.

"One more bowl!"

"Add more meat!"

"This chicken soup is so bland—add more salt!"

Mu Qing couldn't listen to this any longer. "Are all of you aware that this is a temple? It's for worshipping gods—how about you please tone it down a notch?"

However, the crowd of beggars refused to take this scolding. They had once supported the human array alongside heavenly officials, and they had seen with their own eyes that many of those officials couldn't even match them in valor—they had trembled and fled in the face of danger. Furthermore, they were now well acquainted with Shi Qingxuan. They couldn't help but think, *"So, that's what gods are really like."* They weren't all that different from ordinary folk when their lives were on the line. And so, those once-untouchable gods no longer appeared so mighty and sacrosanct.

Suddenly, a surprised scream came from the kitchen. "Who's there?!"

Xie Lian tensed and dashed into the kitchen. The boar butcher and the rooster spirit were screaming and shouting, and Xie Lian hastily comforted them.

“Calm down! Calm down! What happened?”

The rooster spirit was so shaken that goosebumps had risen all over his body. “Granduncle! There’s a ghost! A ghost devoured all the food we prepared! I only just dipped my head under the broth, and when I came back up, there wasn’t a single bowl left! *It’s a ghost!*”

“What are you so scared of?! *You’re* a ghost!” the boar butcher spat.

Xie Lian was slightly perplexed. “How can that be? I just saw you guys make fifty fresh bowls.”

“Yeah!”

But sure enough, now all fifty bowls were empty—even the broth had been completely cleaned out!

As Xie Lian puzzled over the matter, someone in particular came to mind. When he turned around, he saw Hua Cheng leaning against the doorframe.

“San Lang, could it be…?”

“More than likely,” Hua Cheng replied flatly.

“Yes…” Xie Lian mused. “He probably came to congratulate us. Of course he’s welcome, but he ate a bit too much… Now that he’s eaten all the food, what should we do?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Nothing. Add it to his tab.”

The troubled mob of Ghost City kitchen ghosts resigned themselves to cooking up a new batch from scratch. Just then, a clamor came from the main hall and the yard—it sounded like a quarrel had started. Xie Lian was just about to go to mediate when Hua Cheng caught his hand and led him out through a side door.

The two walked out of Puqi Shrine hand in hand. There were trees blocking the way as they went, and it surely would’ve been easier to traverse the path if they separated. But neither wanted to let go, so they twisted and turned, detoured and deviated.

As they meandered, Xie Lian asked, “San Lang, where are we going now?”

“It’s too noisy,” Hua Cheng said. “Let them riot. We’ll leave first.”

Xie Lian peered over his shoulder as they walked. “Are we really going to let them be?” he asked, sounding a little worried. “Puqi Shrine was just rebuilt. What if it collapses again during the fight?”

Hua Cheng was not concerned about such trifles. “If it collapses, it collapses; we’ll build another one. Gege can have as many as he wishes. He need only ask.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha…”

***

That night, within Thousand Lights Temple, Xie Lian was leaning over the jade table next to the divan wearing nothing but a light, snow-white inner robe after his evening bath. He was putting together a calligraphy copybook for Hua Cheng, writing it out stroke by stroke.

Hua Cheng reclined all alone on the divan; he was also wearing nothing but an inner robe with the collar slightly open. He had been gazing at Xie Lian all this time, illuminated by lamplight as mild as jade. He was clearly bored to death, and his fingers busied themselves by twiddling the red coral pearl at the tail end of his braid. After drinking in the view for a while, he squinted his eye, looking satisfied.

“Gege, enough of that,” he sighed. “Come rest now.”

But Xie Lian had only just endured Hua Cheng’s torment—he was determined not to be tricked again. Even if that tone of voice made the tips of his ears burn, he forced himself to stay calm as he continued to write.

“No. San Lang, today someone said your writing is ugly again. You have to practice hard, all right?” he said sternly. “Otherwise, I don’t want anyone to know that I taught you.”

Hua Cheng sat up slightly and arched his brows. “Gege, I remember you once said very clearly that you liked my handwriting.”

After Hua Cheng returned to him, Xie Lian was compliant and docile for a long while, going along with his every whim…which was probably how he wound up spoiling Hua Cheng rotten, and why he became such a bully.

Xie Lian finished writing and placed the brush down. In an even stricter voice, he said, “Knock it off. I’m done; come practice.”

Hua Cheng lazily shuffled over to sit behind Xie Lian. He slipped his arms around to hug his waist and bent slightly to rest his head on his shoulder. He removed the red coral pearl from his hair and placed it on the paper, making it chase after Xie Lian’s hand. It rolled around, purposely obstructing Xie Lian from writing properly.

So mischievous, but at the same time so forceful in asserting his presence. Xie Lian remembered how Heaven’s Eye had said his whole body was radiating evil qi from the inside out—that was all thanks to Hua Cheng, and he felt his heart go soft and aflutter despite himself.

As he struggled lightly, he whispered, “…Write properly.”

“All right. I’ll listen to gege,” Hua Cheng said.

He raised his brush, but he put it back down after only two verses. A single look was all it took for Xie Lian to shake his head and mentally sigh for the umpteenth time, *It’s hopeless.*

After a pause, he also raised a brush and helped Hua Cheng fill in the last two verses. Once he was done, Xie Lian blew lightly and picked up the paper so they could both admire the poem they’d written together.

The ink upon the paper formed the four elegant phrases that had spread throughout heaven and earth.

“After seeing the vast sea, no water can compare;

Scattered from the peak of Mount Wu, there are no other clouds;

Many times I’ve passed through the flowers, yet I spare them no glance;

For half my fate is in cultivation, and the other half, in you.”

Even Eming, hanging beside the table, admired the work with a wide, unblinking eye.

Hua Cheng laughed. “Exceptional. Gege, quick, sign your name. These words will surely stun future generations and echo through the ages.”

Xie Lian had already signed Hua Cheng’s name at the bottom, but despite his urging, he couldn’t bring himself to pick up the brush and add his own name. Hua Cheng finished laughing and pretended to be serious.

“Gege, are you too embarrassed? Let me help you.”

He took hold of Xie Lian’s hand and wrote two characters with rough strokes. Not a single soul would be able to tell that those were characters at all if not for their place on a page, much less that they were supposed to be the characters of Xie Lian’s name.

Feeling ridiculous, Xie Lian could only lean his head against Hua Cheng’s chest and watch as his own hand wrote this thing. But suddenly, those characters looked familiar, as if he had seen them somewhere else before.

A moment later he remembered, and his eyes lit up.

“San Lang! On your arm!” he exclaimed excitedly, catching hold of Hua Cheng’s forearm and pulling up his sleeve. “It’s this!”

Back when they lived together in the old Puqi Shrine, Xie Lian had once noticed a tattoo on Hua Cheng’s arm. The word had seemed like it was written in characters from a foreign land. At the time he had chewed on the matter in his mind, but he never could have imagined that it wasn’t “foreign writing” at all—as it turned out, it was Xie Lian’s own name!

Hua Cheng also glanced at his arm and laughed. “Does gege finally recognize it?”

“I should’ve recognized it a long time ago,” Xie Lian said. “It’s just…”

It’s just…Hua Cheng’s handwriting was truly the craft of the devil. He didn’t need to say anything; Hua Cheng could guess what he was thinking and started laughing heartily. With one arm hugging Xie Lian around the waist, he gave his forehead a gentle peck.

“Don’t worry. As long as gege’s handwriting is beautiful, it’s fine. That makes me a million times happier than my own handwriting ever would.”

Xie Lian’s hand caressed the spot where the tattoo was. The ink of the tattoo was deep, and it was easy to imagine just how painful it had been to receive.

“Was this done when you were little?” he asked softly.

Hua Cheng smiled and pulled his sleeve down, nodding.

Then it was definitely something he had tattooed on himself. An image came to Xie Lian’s mind—a small boy sneakily carving the name of the one he admired into his own arm. So childish, but so brave.

A red string twined between ten fingers clasped tightly together. A scene from a year ago surfaced in Xie Lian’s mind—it was when Hua Cheng had dissipated into butterflies at Mount Tonglu.

In his final moments, Hua Cheng had sworn a soundless oath. Although it had been inaudible, Xie Lian still knew exactly what he said. They were the words Hua Cheng had lived by since he was a child and eternally thereafter beyond his death.

“I am forever your most devoted believer.”

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Tales of Curious Folk Customs

In folk tradition, they tell tales of the Scrap Immortal.

Although he is called the Scrap Immortal, this immortal does not grant his grace to scrap collectors alone—rather, he secures the peace of the entire Mortal Realm. This is because he is also the strongest of martial gods. There exists no evil he cannot vanquish; there are no ghosts he cannot slay. He possesses the power to annihilate the world, but he does not lack the heart to cherish the flower.

However, there are rules and taboos when worshipping a god. If you come across a temple that worships this immortal, you must never prostrate casually, for this Scrap Immortal apparently has a special constitution that summons misfortune.

Don’t believe it? First prepare a set of dice, then rub the hand of the immortal’s divine statue. Then, roll the dice and observe the results—your luck will most certainly be the worst there is.

And so, paying regular devotion to the Scrap Immortal's dusty-white divine statue might only bring more bad luck the more you pray—even reaching the point where water gets stuck between your teeth or you see ghosts while wearing Daoist robes.

In folk tradition, they also tell tales of the Red-Robed Ghost King.

Although the Ghost King is not considered human, he possesses an enormous number of worshippers. There are legions of people who secretly set up shrines to the Ghost King in their own homes to worship him day and night, praying for good fortune. For not only is the Ghost King invincible, it seems that he has never tasted a single defeat. Furthermore, his luck is powerful beyond match.

Don't believe it? Before rolling a set of dice, prostrate before him. If he is willing to assist, your next roll will definitely be exceptional.

But ghosts aren't like gods, so naturally there are even more taboos. Although this Ghost King is powerful, his personality is eccentric and extreme. If he's happy, he will help you even if you don't pray. If he's displeased, you can give a thousand gold and he will still turn away. If he's very displeased, he may just end your life.

So, by the same logic, it's best to show your respects, but stay far away.

However, if you worship the divine statues of this god and this ghost together, you will witness a miracle.

The Red-Robed Ghost King will dispel all the misfortune enveloping the Scrap Immortal and allow him to reveal his true appearance. You will be shocked to discover that the Scrap Immortal's color isn't dusty white—rather, it is shimmering gold.

Legends are usually based in fact. However, this is a tale from a long, long time ago, and perhaps it would need to be told in full to be understood. And as a saga spanning eight hundred years, it would be a very, very long tale to tell. People might not have the patience to listen.

But one thing is certain: in order for them to display their true strength, the two must be worshipped together. In this way, one can receive double the fortune and twice the invincibility.

By the heaven official’s blessing, no paths are bound!

THE END

Chapter 134:
Extra 1
Lantern Riddles on Yuanxiao Night

’TIS THE FESTIVE Shangyuan holiday, a joyous night.

Although spring had begun, the brisk winds of winter hadn’t yet departed. Xie Lian trudged along the roadside hauling a large sack on his back, his face slightly flushed from the gales.

The sack held a huge assortment of things he’d just collected. He didn’t know whether any of it was useful, but regardless, this was all he could count on to make a living going forward.

Not long after, he came upon a stall on the side of the street.

The stall was called “He Family Snacks,” and it sold simple fare. A family of three was sitting around a small table further inside, likely the owner of the establishment with his wife and child. There was another woman bustling about the tables, slender in figure and lovely in looks. The owner called out to her to stop working and come sit with them inside, but she wouldn’t listen; she simply trilled “Coming,” with a voice like a yellow warbler’s. A few scattered customers sat at the other tables, and it seemed they’d come specifically for this young woman. There was casual conversation here and there, but before long, they all went home. After all, today was the Shangyuan Festival.

Ah, it’s Yuanxiao,[3] Xie Lian remarked inwardly.

When he was little, the king and queen of Xianle ate yuanxiao with him every Shangyuan. Young Xie Lian had been a very picky eater—he didn’t like yuanxiao, and still didn’t like it even when the imperial chef served him the best of the best ladled into the finest bowls. It was too sweet, and the stickiness made his teeth itch. He’d refuse every type of filling on offer, gulp all the balls down in a couple of swallows, and be done with it.

When he was a little older, he ran off on his own to cultivate on Mount Taicang. Sometimes he’d go home when Yuanxiao rolled around, sometimes he wouldn’t. He hadn’t had yuanxiao that many times overall.

When he thought about it now, he was surprised to discover he no longer remembered what it tasted like.

Xie Lian stopped next to the stall and glanced at it cautiously, then cautiously lowered the big, ugly sack on his shoulder to the ground. Finally, he cautiously entered.

He removed his bamboo hat and held it in his hands as he voiced his request. “Boss, one bowl of yuanxiao, please, if you have any?”

The owner, a rather old man, glanced at him. Before he could answer, the young woman beckoned him to sit.

“Yes, sir,” she responded with a smile. “Come in and have a seat!”

She immediately went to work. Xie Lian sat down, but he was puzzled when he saw the owner shake his head. He wondered if he was dirty and had thus incurred the man’s displeasure, so he immediately checked his sleeves; he only relaxed a little when he was certain they were clean.

“Is something the matter?” Xie Lian asked.

If the owner didn’t like his bag inside the stall, he would take it outside. But the owner took another look at him and shook his head.

“Tragic. Real tragic.”

“Huh? What is?” Xie Lian asked.

“You’re eating yuanxiao at some street stall outside in the cold on this perfectly good Yuanxiao evening. How tragic is that?”

Xie Lian was rendered speechless for a moment. “…Don’t say that. Do you want my business or not…?”

The owner didn’t respond; he turned away to retrieve the bowl and end the conversation with Xie Lian.

After sitting there for a bit, Xie Lian sensed someone was eyeing him. Or rather, eyeing him and his abnormally gigantic bag.

The owner’s daughter had snuck over and was now crouching on the ground and poking at the bag. She seemed very curious about what was stuffed inside, and it took several calls from her mother before she went back inside. This was a time before Xie Lian had developed his impenetrably thick skin, so he couldn’t help but give his giant bag a kick in the hope of stuffing it under the table where no one could see. Unfortunately, this was a small stall, and the tables and benches were similarly tiny. Nothing could be hidden. Left with no other choice, Xie Lian cleared his throat quietly a few times and did his best to ignore the eyes of others.

He would get used to it eventually. It was no big deal.

Suddenly, a thought struck him. He hurriedly reached into his breast pocket, and his face changed. *Now it’s an even worse tragedy!* he thought. *Not only am I eating yuanxiao all alone in the cold at a street stall—I don’t have enough money!*

He planned to make a quick getaway then and there, but of course the owner just had to come over with a large porcelain bowl before he could.

“Five pennies,” the owner said as he set the bowl in front of him.

“…” Xie Lian was at a loss for words. “Uh…I…”

He cleared his throat a few times, his fist pressed against his mouth.

“Do you not have the money?” the owner asked. Still stricken, Xie Lian couldn’t reply, but the owner simply said, “Forget it. I’ll give it to you for free, considering how tragic you look. I’ll be packing up once you’re done, so hurry home. Today is Yuanxiao, the day for family reunions!”

“…”

Xie Lian sat back down. He didn’t have anywhere or anyone to return to after finishing this bowl of yuanxiao, but he didn’t voice that aloud. He simply mumbled a soft “Thank you.”

The owner left as soon as he set down the bowl. He served up the remaining yuanxiao in the small pot at the front of the stall to a different table.

The little girl was biting on her spoon with her head tilted. “When is gege coming home? I wanna wait until he’s back before digging in.”

“He’s so late,” the owner chimed in. “Coming home so late on Yuanxiao; how outrageous!”

“He’s working hard. He’ll be home soon,” the old woman chided. “Don’t scold him when he comes back. Miao-er! Miao-er, stop working. I feel awful always needing you to help out. Come here, and let’s eat together.”

“Not at all!” the young woman replied. She cleaned the last table before sitting down with them to share yuanxiao.

They seemed to be waiting for another member of the family to join them, and the four of them chatted and laughed all the while. Xie Lian watched them, then picked up his own bowl. He delivered one yuanxiao to his mouth and sipped a mouthful of the sweet soup.

He still couldn’t tell what it tasted like.

***

“Gege, gege?”

Xie Lian snapped out of it and noticed that Hua Cheng was gazing at him. The red of Hua Cheng’s clothes was even more vibrant against his skin as the lantern lights gave a gentle hue to his pale, lifeless complexion. Xie Lian lost himself for a moment watching him before he could answer.

“What?”

“Gege, are you tired? Do you need a break from walking?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian nodded absentmindedly.

“Sorry, I went overboard last night,” Hua Cheng apologized.

It took a moment for Xie Lian to realize what he meant, and he quickly waved his hands. “Wh-what are you saying? That’s not it at all—everything’s fine!”

Hua Cheng arched an eyebrow. “Is that so? If everything is fine even after *that*, does that mean I *didn’t* go overboard last night? Does that mean I can…?”

“…”

Suddenly, Xie Lian remembered that they were still strolling along the main street of Ghost City! This jolted him back to the present, and he scanned the area in alarm. Sure enough, without him realizing it, they had been surrounded by a dense crowd of strange, oddly shaped creatures. The ones with long ears had them perked, the ones with short ears stretched their necks, and almost all of them were staring at them with unblinking eyes as wide as saucers.

Xie Lian was shocked to speechlessness. At last, he admonished, "Gosh, San Lang!"

Hua Cheng smiled in response and folded his hands behind his back. "All right, all right. I was wrong. I'll stop."

By then, Xie Lian had moved his eyes away from the yuanxiao monster's stall on the streetside. Countless vibrant red lanterns lined both sides of Ghost City's main street, bearing riddles just waiting to be solved.

"Solve a riddle! Solve a riddle!" the ghosts hollered. "There's a prize if you get it right! A great prize!"

Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian. "Gege, wanna try? There are prizes to win."

Xie Lian walked over. "Let me give it a shot."

The crowd of ghosts erupted with excitement, pushing and shoving one another in the chaos.

"Shh! Shh! Granduncle is about to solve riddles! *Granduncle is about to solve riddles!*"

"…"

Xie Lian was left a little speechless by the overwhelming wave of enthusiastic shouting—they made it sound like he was about to put on a grand spectacle, like a great shaman dance. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Xie Lian moved to pick a random lantern, but instead, a tentacle carefully delivered one to his hands directly.

"Please, go ahead! Go ahead!"

It didn’t matter to Xie Lian which lantern he started with, so he accepted this one and gave it a look.

The riddle was: *Sought until the head of white.*[4]

“‘Wo,’ as in ‘Me,’” Xie Lian answered without much thought. “‘Sought until the head of white,’ or ‘sought until old age.’ Take the dash on top of ‘white,’ 白, and add it to ‘seek,’ 找, and it makes the character 我 for ‘me.’”

Hua Cheng clapped. “Gege, you’re amazing,” he praised.

The ghosts clapped as well, their applause as loud as thunder. They also howled and hollered, and some strange black shadow creature even started doing flips into the air as it cheered—it was incredibly over the top.

Xie Lian sweatdropped. “This is actually…really easy, you know.”

The tentacle handed over a second lantern and beckoned him. “Please, go ahead! Go ahead!”

Xie Lian took it. This time, the riddle was: *One day of the Spring Festival.*

Again, without thinking, he gave his answer. “‘Fu,’ for ‘Husband.’ ‘Festival,’ 节, is a homonym for the word ‘snipe.’ And so, one ‘day,’ 日, sniped from ‘spring,’ 春, makes the character 夫, which means ‘man’ or ‘husband’—depending on context.”

Hua Cheng was about to clap again, but Xie Lian stopped him. “Don’t. This one was easy too.”

“Really?” Hua Cheng grinned happily at him. “But, gege, I really do think you’re amazing.”

Such a flatterer, as always, Xie Lian thought. *If I solved a lantern riddle* you *devised,* that *would be amazing…*

The tentacle gave him a third lantern and hollered, “Please, go ahead! Go ahead!”

When he looked down at it, Xie Lian frowned a little.

“Whoa! This one’s hard!” the crowd chimed in.

Xie Lian nodded. Sure enough, the answer to this riddle wasn’t as easy to figure out as the others.

The riddle was: *Bashfully do I lower my head to express my admiring heart.*

It wasn’t *that* difficult, though. Xie Lian had the solution only a moment later.

“‘Bashful,’ 羞, refers to the touch-me-not plant, so we take the character’s plant radical, 艹. ‘Lower head,’ 低头, indicates that one is to take the head, or the first part, of the word ‘lower,’ giving us 亻. Finally, we take the heart, or middle, of the phrase ‘admiring heart,’倾心, which is ‘匕’. All three parts, when pieced together, make the word…‘flower,’ 花. The answer to this riddle is ‘hua,’ for ‘flower.’”

As soon as he finished and announced the answer, he covered his ears. Sure enough, it set off pandemonium again; the crowd praised him with boundless abandon, their hype comically over the top. It made him cringe.

Wearing a toothy grin, Hua Cheng gazed at him. “Gege, this time you really were amazing.”

The tentacle surreptitiously slunk over with another lantern.

Xie Lian returned the grin. “I’ve got another trick that’s even more amazing. This time, I can guess the answer without even seeing the riddle. Do you believe me?”

“Oh,” said Hua Cheng, his eye widening at his proclamation. “Is that right? Does gege really know such an astonishing trick?”

Xie Lian took the lantern. “Of course. Let me guess—the answer is ‘city.’ That is, the ‘cheng’ in Hua Cheng. Right?”

He raised the lantern, and sure enough, the riddle said: *One move of armed forces stabilizes the south.*

“‘One,’ 一, moved on ‘armed forces,’ 干戈, changes the 干 to 土 and leaves the 戈,” Xie Lian explained. “As for ‘stabilizes the south,’ 南方定, the south, or the bottom, of the word 方 remains in place, which changes it to 万. When combined, it forms the word 城, ‘cheng,’ for ‘city.’ This should’ve been the hardest of the riddles, but unfortunately…”

Unfortunately, he had guessed the pattern beforehand. And what phrase did the four answers form when strung together? *Wo fu Hua Cheng—My husband, Hua Cheng.*

With their scheme exposed, the ghosts stopped cheering. Instead, they turned their gazes skyward and began to cough awkwardly. Hua Cheng’s eye swept slowly across the crowd. As if that look had terrified them out of their wits, some ghosts scurried into random lanterns while others burrowed underground. The ones remaining clutched their heads as they cried out for forgiveness.

“Don’t be angry, Chengzhu! It wasn’t my idea!”

“It wasn’t mine either, *quack*!”

“Yeah, right! You were the loudest of all when agreeing to it!”

“Beat it,” Hua Cheng said mildly.

In an instant, everyone on the street—humans and ghosts alike—scattered and disappeared like clouds in the wind.

Xie Lian grinned as he hung the lantern onto its rack. “Let’s head back.”

The two walked toward Thousand Lights Temple side by side.

Along the way, Hua Cheng also pleaded for mercy in a deadpan tone. “Don’t look at me like that, gege. I really didn’t tell them to do that.”

“I know,” Xie Lian replied with a smile. “You wouldn’t have constructed the riddles like that.”

“Oh? And how does gege suppose I would’ve constructed them?” Hua Cheng asked.

“It would’ve been ‘My husband, San Lang,’ of course…” Xie Lian replied.

He hadn’t suspected anything until that moment, but he suddenly trailed off as he remembered that “a loose tongue causes trouble.” But it was too late—Hua Cheng had already burst out laughing.

“Got you, gege! Nice one!”

“You sly thing…”

The two arrived at Thousand Lights Temple. As soon as they entered the great hall, Xie Lian noticed that a table had been set up on the jade platform. He blinked. As he approached it, he noticed two bowls of yuanxiao.

When he looked back, he saw that Hua Cheng had approached as well.

“This was what gege was looking at on the street, right?” he asked.

Xie Lian nodded.

“Sit down, gege,” Hua Cheng beckoned. “Let’s eat together.”

“…”

Instead of taking a seat, Xie Lian flung himself into Hua Cheng’s arms and buried his face in his chest. He hugged Hua Cheng tightly, refusing to let go, and Hua Cheng returned the embrace.

After so many years, Xie Lian could finally recall the taste of Yuanxiao.

Chapter 135:
Extra 2
The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part One)

WHEN XIE LIAN opened his eyes, he found himself lying on the floor inside a strange house. This puzzled him.

He had been training at the Royal Cultivation Hall on Mount Taicang. How had he ended up here?

Confused, Xie Lian sat up. He noticed he was wearing a simple white cultivation robe, but it was *too* simple—it was starkly basic, as if he were some peasant. The material wasn't great either; it was coarse and chafed his skin.

Xie Lian frowned. He wanted to climb to his feet, yet as he straightened up, he noticed further signs of discomfort from his body—his waist was sore, his legs were sore, his lower belly was sore, and his neck was sore. Was it because he'd been lying there uncovered on the floor the entire night?

…Surely not. He was hardly so delicate.

Where were Feng Xin and Mu Qing? As they came to mind, Xie Lian called out, "Feng—"

He promptly dissolved into a fit of coughing and was left utterly baffled. His throat didn't feel great either.

The night before, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had argued again over something trivial. They were so loud that Xie Lian couldn't concentrate on his meditation, so he ordered them to go outside and train idioms. He'd gotten drowsy as he listened to them train two hundred idioms or more while continually blowing their tops, so he headed off to rest. How had he woken up in this unbelievable, hugely perplexing situation?!

Xie Lian finally pulled himself to his feet using the table next to him and surveyed his surroundings. This place was probably an inn, but if he chose to stay at an inn instead of camping outdoors, he wouldn't select one that looked so *economical*. His hands and feet weren’t bound, nor were the doors and windows locked, meaning he wasn’t being detained. If someone or something had ambushed him, why would they toss him here?

The more Xie Lian thought about his situation, the more peculiar he found it, particularly his current physical condition. With aching arms, he stripped off his outer robe to check for injuries—and yet, when he looked down at himself, the blood instantly drained from his face.

Amorous red marks covered him densely from chest to stomach. It was as though a shower of oversized flower petals had fallen and landed on his jade-fair skin and bloomed into blossoms of vivid red—so very red—and he was left deeply unsettled.

He threw himself at a nearby mirror, and it was just as he’d expected! It wasn’t just his chest and midriff—the marks covered his neck and back too.

Xie Lian was shocked speechless. He didn’t dare remove any more clothing down below for further checks, as it was already more than obvious what had happened.

During the period that he’d been unconscious, someone had…taken his virginity.

For the first time in his life, Xie Lian understood what the phrase “legs going weak” meant, but he ultimately managed to stay upright and steady.

A long time ago, he’d heard horrible gossip from the palace maidens who attended him—tales of shady establishments run by evil crooks who specialized in rape and sex trafficking. They would drug girls, then commit their crimes. But…but…

Xie Lian clutched his head and mumbled to no one, “But I’m a man…!”

His appearance right now was unseemly to the extreme. In addition to the kiss marks and fingerprint bruises from a heavy hand, there were also—mortifyingly enough—bite marks. Xie Lian covered his face, feeling his mind burn while his body ran cold.

Then, something extremely serious hit him. *Oh no!*

In the cultivation method he practiced, carnal acts were strictly forbidden. Didn’t this mean he’d broken that precept?

Quickly, he tried to test his spiritual power. Sure enough, there was nothing!

Xie Lian had always been a calm person, but under the current circumstances, he was on the verge of breaking down.

He didn’t know how this had happened…but he found himself—like *that*—when he woke up. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both gone, and someone had done something somehow and now he wasn’t a virgin anymore. He really was going to fall apart!

Even after trying to compose himself for a long moment, he still couldn’t accept this. He was in a tizzy. Nevertheless, he couldn’t just stay as he was, so he grabbed his clothes and scrambled into them before rushing out of the inn. No one on the road stopped him as he went, and Xie Lian sighed in relief at that. He didn’t have the mind to care about the oddness of his surroundings—from the architecture, to the dress of the pedestrians, to the accents around him.

Perhaps it was just the shame he felt, but he kept thinking that everyone could tell what had happened to him and were giving him odd, appraising looks. This urged him to walk faster and faster until finally he broke out into a mad dash. He charged into a small forest and slammed his fist into one tree, snapping it with a *crack*.

“Jerk!” he shouted angrily.

He wanted to curse the one who had abused him with the most malicious words there were, but again and again, all he could come up with was “jerk,” “scumbag,” and “sleaze.” He felt stifled, unable to vent the fire inside him—and there was no way he would burst into tears. All he could do was set his mind to furiously swing his fists.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

He knocked down dozens of trees in a row. At last, the local Lord of Soil and Ground crawled out and hugged his leg.

“Your Highness! Your Highness, please stop hitting things!”

Although Xie Lian's rage still brimmed within him, this old man gave him pause—as obviously no ordinary human could have popped out of the ground.

"Who are you?" Xie Lian demanded.

"I'm the local Lord of Soil and Ground, Your Highness!" said the old man as he wiped away his tears. "I retired to this little wood to pass my old age. If Your Elderliness keeps hitting the trees, I'll be made homeless!"

Xie Lian knew that his own problems had nothing to do with everyone else and that he shouldn't randomly take his issues out on them. Besides, no matter how insignificant the position, a Lord of Soil and Ground was still a heavenly official—and this one was an elderly official, a senior to whom he needed to show respect. Thus, Xie Lian arduously pulled back some of his temper and stopped the violence.

"Forgive me…I was overly riled up," he said, his tone now softened. "How about this—I will compensate you for all the trees I broke."

The Lord of Soil and Ground dropped the hands hugging his leg and hurriedly assured him, "No, no, no, no, no, no need, no need! How can I ask Your Elderliness to pay?! The mere fact that your lordship is willing to talk to me brings light to this humble little god's dwelling!"

Xie Lian found his words a bit strange. A Lord of Soil and Ground was, in all seriousness, a heavenly official, and this one appeared to be much older than he was. So why was he so afraid of him, and why did he call him "Your Elderliness"? He wasn't in the mood to ask about it, though.

"Sir, you are the Lord of Soil and Ground of this area, correct? You must be very familiar with the region? Might you aid me in seeking out two individuals?" Xie Lian asked politely as his hand dug into his sleeve to reach for a few pieces of gold foil as an offering.

The Lord of Soil and Ground waved his hands wildly when he saw what Xie Lian was doing. "Oh no, no need for that! Whom does my lord seek?"

Just as well, for Xie Lian didn't manage to pull out anything. He took his hand back out. "My two servants, Feng Xin and Mu Qing," he replied.

"…"

The Lord of Soil and Ground's expression suddenly turned very strange.

"What's the matter? Is there a problem?" Xie Lian asked.

"No, no, no, no, no problem," said the Lord of Soil and Ground. "It's just…"

It's just…what's wrong with His Highness? It's been eight hundred years, so why is he still calling General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen his servants? Would the generals get mad about that? Gosh, forget it. Those two getting angry isn't as scary as that *lord getting angry if this lord isn't well taken care of.*

Thus, he said, "Please wait here for a moment, your lordship. I will go and find them for you right now!"

"Thank you for your trouble," Xie Lian said. He was about to bow in courtesy, but when he looked up, the deity was already gone. His forehead was still burning, and he pressed a hand over it.

Some time later, a confused voice came from ahead.

"What's going on?"

Xie Lian looked up and saw Feng Xin and Mu Qing—but they weren't the same Feng Xin and Mu Qing he knew.

Sure, their general appearance was the same, but their demeanor had changed. They didn't seem like two rash young men, but more like generals with years of battle experience under their belts. Moreover, both were wearing black robes that looked rather sumptuous, quite unlike the dress that ordinary folks wore, and quite unlike anything Xie Lian had ever seen them wear.

The one who had spoken was Feng Xin, and he walked over. "Your Highness, what are you doing out here by yourself?"

"That's what *I* was going to ask," Xie Lian said. "Where did you two run off to? I told you guys to train idioms outside last night, but why could I not find a shadow of you this morning?"

An odd look that matched the Lord of Soil and Ground's crossed both Feng Xin and Mu Qing's faces, like they couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

Xie Lian felt his head splitting, and he cried, “And what’s with those outfits? What in the world is going on?!”

Feng Xin looked down at himself and wondered, confused, “What’s wrong with my outfit? Isn’t this normal?”

Mu Qing, on the other hand, said, “What are you talking about? Are you still addled from sleep? I was certainly not at your place last night.”

Xie Lian clutched his head, wanting to scream and shout, but he forced himself to be calm. After thinking for a moment, he said, “I get it. Something has overtaken both of you too, right? Just like me?”

The odd looks on Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s faces only grew odder.

“I’m confused,” Feng Xin said. “Your Highness, why don’t you just tell us why you called us here?”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Don’t bother. I was wondering why he called us and not *him*. His brains are probably fried.”

Xie Lian couldn’t follow their exchange at all. “Him? Who? The state preceptor?”

“…”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing exchanged a look of dismay, then Mu Qing took a step forward.

“Your Highness,” he called.

“What?” Xie Lian answered.

“My memory is a little fuzzy right now,” Mu Qing said. “Can you tell me what we’ve been doing for the past few days?”

“Haven’t we been training at the Royal Cultivation Hall?” Xie Lian said.

“Where’s Hua Cheng?” Mu Qing asked.

The sound of that name was extremely familiar, but when Xie Lian considered it further, he simply couldn’t place it. He asked, sounding lost, “Hua…Cheng? Who is that?”

There was a long silence.

“Very good. I get it,” Mu Qing declared at last.

He shot a look at the shocked Feng Xin, and the two went to the side to talk.

Xie Lian suddenly found them somewhat suspicious. “What did you *get*?” he asked, on alert. “What are you two talking about?”

Once an agreement had been reached, the two turned back around.

“Your Highness, let’s go,” said Feng Xin.

Xie Lian was even more suspicious now. “Where to?”

“To someone who can solve this problem,” answered Mu Qing. “Come!”

Xie Lian was wary, and he backed away. Mu Qing noticed that he wanted to flee, and he cried “Don’t go!” as he swung his arm out and shot forth a streak of spiritual light that seemed meant to bind Xie Lian.

As if Xie Lian was going to stick around. He bolted!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both utterly perplexed, and they yelled at each other as they ran after him.

“What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?!” Feng Xin cried. “What’s wrong with him?! He can’t seriously have memory loss *this* bad?! Forgetting eight hundred years?!”

“Finally! His brain is *finally* shot after eating so much random crap!” Mu Qing yelled.

“That’s impossible! Something probably happened when he went out by himself. Let’s hurry and find him! His mind is only seventeen years old right now!”

Even at a time like this, Mu Qing couldn’t resist making a sarcastic jab. “Yeah, and he’s innocent and naive and silly to boot. A pampered, spoiled seventeen-year-old crown prince!”

“Wait! Let’s tell *him* first. Quick, tell *him*!”

He, of course, must be informed of this!

***

Xie Lian ran for over a dozen kilometers in one breath and only began to pant after he'd stopped. He still felt like he was lost inside a massive cloud of fog, trapped in a giant net of peril.

What in the world was going on?

This wasn't normal. Everything was too abnormal!

Because of course he knew exactly what Mu Qing was capable of! Creating that spiritual light would've taken him several hundred years of cultivation at minimum, so there was no way he could be the real Mu Qing! He must've been an impostor!

And as for himself…he wasn't normal either. Through this run, he discovered that he was as light as a swallow—well, he was already as light as a swallow, but his agility had somehow increased exponentially. He was even more formidable now.

Everything was wrong!

He calmed down, calmed down, calmed down. Once he did, it suddenly occurred to Xie Lian that Mu Qing had mentioned a name.

"Hua Cheng," he murmured.

For some reason, his heart stirred as he said the name, even though it should've been very foreign to him. It was as if a small flower had bloomed in a corner at the bottom of his heart. He repeated the name again and again, unable to help himself.

Hua Cheng, Hua Cheng, Hua Cheng.

This person was probably an immensely significant character—perhaps he'd played a critical role in this incident. Xie Lian had to find him.

With his mind made up, Xie Lian headed for the city.

When he first realized what had happened to his body, Xie Lian couldn't accept it at all, but he had gotten over it less than an hour later. While his body and mind were still in turmoil, the mystifying situation at hand left him no time to panic. The real Feng Xin and Mu Qing were missing, which only proved that the evil mastermind was a terrible creature. He had to get ahold of himself immediately and uncover the truth.

Thus, by the time he entered town, he had regained his usual composure.

Though he hadn’t the mind to drink tea, he picked a teahouse at random and sat by the window on the upper level. Xie Lian picked up the cup on the table and glanced at it—it was caked with years of stains that couldn’t be wiped clean. Even a single look at it made him weary, so he placed the cup back down and ignored it.

In the teahouse, there was a relatively attractive and graceful woman playing a pipa and singing like a warbler. A group of men, old and young, sat around her and snickered as they watched. The woman was singing an ordinary local song—something about a girl going out in the morning to pick flowers—but she hadn’t sung it for long before the group of men began hollering at her.

“Bah, how boring. Next!”

“Yeah, this song is bad. Change it up, change it up!”

“Sing *this* one!”

Helpless, the songstress had to comply with the crowd and switched to a rather titillating tune. Gently and slowly she plucked the strings, and she sang with a voice so sweet and supple it made one blush. Satisfied at last, the audience cheered and applauded. In contrast, it made Xie Lian feel a little uncomfortable as he sat in his window seat at the corner of the second floor.

Listening closer to the lyrics, he found that the ballad described the intense love and passion of a newly wedded couple on their wedding night. It was extremely, audaciously explicit—Xie Lian had never heard such perverted songs in the royal capital. In the past, he would’ve brushed it off as a foul breeze that blew past his ears; it would have had nothing to do with him, for he would never in his life think about such things. But now, it was different.

Although he had no memory of what had happened, the act had been done, so listening to a song about the subject affected him differently. And he’d also discovered something terrifying: his thoughts were no longer under his control!

A few shameless lyrics made his heart wander wildly. Broken, fragmented images continuously poured into his head—two hands tightly intertwined, a red string desperately entangled between the fingers. He could almost hear the broken gasps, the pleading whimpers, and…the coaxing murmurs of a certain man.

What were these images…? What the heck were they?!

Embarrassed and frustrated, Xie Lian bit his bottom lip and clenched his fists. At last, unable to bear it any longer, he slammed his fists violently on the table.

The loud bang made the patrons at nearby tables stare at him with wide eyes. Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it and mumble an apology. He desperately wished he could cover his ears with his hands and block out the song—if the songstress kept it up, he'd have to leave!

All of a sudden, the singing came to an abrupt stop, and a sharp cry pulled him from his wandering thoughts. Xie Lian's head shot up, and he saw that a large group of men had surrounded the girl and were attempting to grope her.

The songstress stood up in shock, hugging her pipa to her chest tightly. "Sirs, let's just listen to the songs. Please don't touch me…" she pleaded.

Some of the men started kicking up a fuss. "So what if we feel you up? There's no way we're the only ones who've done it. I refuse to believe you've never gotten touched while you're out here selling yourself!"

The songstress was so upset that her eyes grew red around the rims. "What do you mean, selling myself?" she cried. "I'm selling my voice, not my body!"

The men purposely ignored her.

"Heh—you talk like you're so *chaste*! If you were really so proper, you wouldn't be out here selling yourself!"

"Yeah! You sang such a provocative song, but now you turn around and say you're not selling what your mouth is offering? 'Chaste,' my ass—what a joke!"

The songstress was going to pass out from anger. “You’re the ones who told me to sing it,” she exclaimed, her voice trembling. “I only sang it because all of you made me!”

Yet no matter what she said, the awful patrons always had a comeback. “You sang it because we told you to? So *obedient*. Only goes to show that deep down, you wanted to sing something like that and seduce people!”

Xie Lian couldn’t listen anymore. He was already in a bad mood, and now his rage was peaking. There was a flash of white, and before those rowdy men had any clue what was happening, a row of them had already been knocked to the ground.

“Who the hell are you?!” yelled the ringleader of the group, whose ass was now facing the sky. “You dare to provoke us?!”

Xie Lian stood in front of the songstress and shielded her. He cracked his knuckles, though he did not allow his anger to show on his face.

“Quit while you’re ahead,” he said darkly. “Anyone would be moved by the sight of a flowerlike beauty, but if you do not understand how to treat her with respect, then you are shamefully classless.”

“She’s the one who sang that song,” someone complained. “She can sing, but we can’t touch?!”

“Correct.” Xie Lian repeated each word slowly and firmly and threw several large men down the stairs as he did. “*She* can sing, but *you* can’t touch!”

The men landed on their behinds in a terrible tizzy. The fall wasn’t actually a serious one, but it was more than enough to frighten them—and since no one could even see his lightning-fast moves, there was no chance of fighting back. They fled in a hurry.

When Xie Lian turned back around at the top of the stairs, the songstress curtsied to him in immense gratitude.

“Thank you so much for helping me, Daozhang!” she said.

“It required no effort on my part,” Xie Lian said. “Miss, are you going to be staying here?”

The songstress nodded, so Xie Lian nodded in return. “Very well. Then keep singing your songs.”

With a whirl of his sleeves, he sat back down with upright poise to stand guard over her.

The other men saw that he wasn’t leaving and was keeping an eye on the place, so they didn’t dare harass the girl anymore. Understanding his intention, the songstress felt even more grateful. As she carefully began to sing once again, she picked one of the same lively, local tunes she’d been performing at first.

Xie Lian poured himself a cup of tea, but just as he was about to drink it, he noticed the heavy stains again. After a brief hesitation, he still couldn’t win against himself and put down the cup with a sigh. As he idly turned his head, he paused.

He saw a man sitting in a far more magnificent red tavern across the street.

The man was rather tall and dressed all in red. Although he wore a black eyepatch that added an air of wildness to him, it couldn’t obscure his handsome features. Robes redder than maple, skin as white as snow, a silver flagon in his hand that shimmered like the two silver vambraces around his wrists. At a glance, he was exceptionally eye-catching—and he was looking this way.

Their eyes met. When the man saw that Xie Lian had noticed his gaze, he smiled and raised his flagon slightly, as if he was toasting him.

“…”

For some reason, when Xie Lian’s eyes met that man’s, it felt like lightning coursing through him. He quickly averted his gaze, but while he pretended not to care, his heart started to race.

How strange. The man certainly was dazzling and he had a mysterious appeal, but it wasn’t as if Xie Lian had never seen an attractive man before. Why was he reacting like *this* at the sight of him?

He pondered for a moment and amended that last thought, for it wasn’t correct—upon reflection, he knew he had never met a man as dazzling and handsome as this one.

He's a rare character—I should pay more attention, Xie Lian thought.

When he turned his head to look again, however, the man in red had disappeared—just like that. He was like a splendid falling maple leaf that mischievously fluttered across his vision, stunning him and disappearing in an instant. It was almost unreal, like a fleeting dream.

Trying to be inconspicuous about it, Xie Lian peered at the magnificent tavern across the way for a while. When he could find no trace of the man, he finally gave up. He exhaled softly, uncertain whether he was really feeling disappointed.

Oh well, he thought, rubbing his forehead.

Yet when he turned his head, there was someone sitting across from him. He had a hand propping up his cheek, and he was staring at Xie Lian.

When their eyes met, Xie Lian's mind went blank.

The man, however, simply said with a wide grin, "Daozhang, might you treat me to a cup of wine?"

Chapter 136:
Extra 2
The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Two)

IT WAS THE MAN in red who had toasted him from afar earlier—and he'd sat down so casually right in front of Xie Lian.

Xie Lian blinked, and it took him a moment to be certain that this man was really talking to him. He immediately got ahold of himself—he couldn't allow this man's powerful presence to shake him.

Maintaining his calm, he politely replied, "Unfortunately, I abstain from alcohol. It seems I won't be able to treat you to a cup."

The man in red laughed aloud and got even more comfortable in his seat. "Is that right?" he said. "But, Daozhang, your face seems gripped by distress. Surely liquor would be helpful."

"My lord must be mistaken," Xie Lian stated without further reaction.

Although the most important precept of his cultivation method had been broken, he knew he mustn't abandon his work and give up on the other, lesser precepts.

He had been distant and mild this whole time, but the man clearly had no intention of leaving. Instead, it seemed like he'd settled in.

"If Daozhang won't treat me, then shall I help myself?"

Xie Lian glanced at him, then looked around. Weird—it wasn't like there weren't empty seats around, so why did he have to sit at his table to drink? There was no reason to refuse him this, however, so Xie Lian replied, "Go ahead."

The man gave a lazy wave. The waiter at this restaurant had never encountered a patron of this caliber, and, hardly daring to breathe, he hurriedly brought over a flagon and cup and wiped the table vigorously for fear of mistreating the guest.

Seeing how relaxed and comfortable this man in red appeared as he drank by himself, Xie Lian couldn’t resist asking, “Does my lord ask everyone to treat you to a cup of wine when meeting for the first time?”

“Hmm? Oh, no,” the man said, grinning. “To tell you the truth, Daozhang, most people usually never even get to see my face.”

His tone was rather arrogant, but Xie Lian didn’t find it unpleasant.

They sat together, each in their own world. Xie Lian kept his eyes staring elsewhere, trying to appear wholly calm. After a while, the man spoke up once more.

With a hand still propping up his cheek, he said, “Might I ask your name, Daozhang? What shall I call you?”

Xie Lian made up a surname without much thought and replied, “My surname is Hua.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Oh…Hua-daozhang.”

“What shall I call you, my lord?” Xie Lian asked.

“You can simply call me San Lang, Daozhang,” the man said.

Xie Lian could tell he didn’t want to give his real identity, and he wasn’t going to force the issue. He thought for a moment but couldn’t recall any notable characters who were ranked third in their family, so he stopped trying to figure it out.

Suddenly, he noticed that a lock of San Lang’s jet-black hair next to his cheek was tied into a thin braid. A red coral pearl was fastened at the end of it.

The bead was small and softly lustrous; it was clearly worth a hefty fortune. But Xie Lian had the nagging feeling he’d seen it somewhere before—maybe in his bedchamber, amidst the other gems and precious stones that were scattered all over the floor? He couldn’t be sure.

San Lang noticed his stare. “You like this?” Raising his long, slender, fair fingers, he gently caught the coral pearl and gave it a squeeze.

As Xie Lian watched him, for some reason he felt a sudden pinch on his chest—as if he’d also just been squeezed…somewhere. He jerked backward, a large movement that attracted the attention of several nearby patrons.

San Lang nonchalantly looked up and asked, sounding shocked, “Daozhang, what’s the matter?”

He extended a hand as though to offer assistance. But of course Xie Lian didn’t take it, and he quickly sat back down properly.

“No—it’s nothing. That bead…”

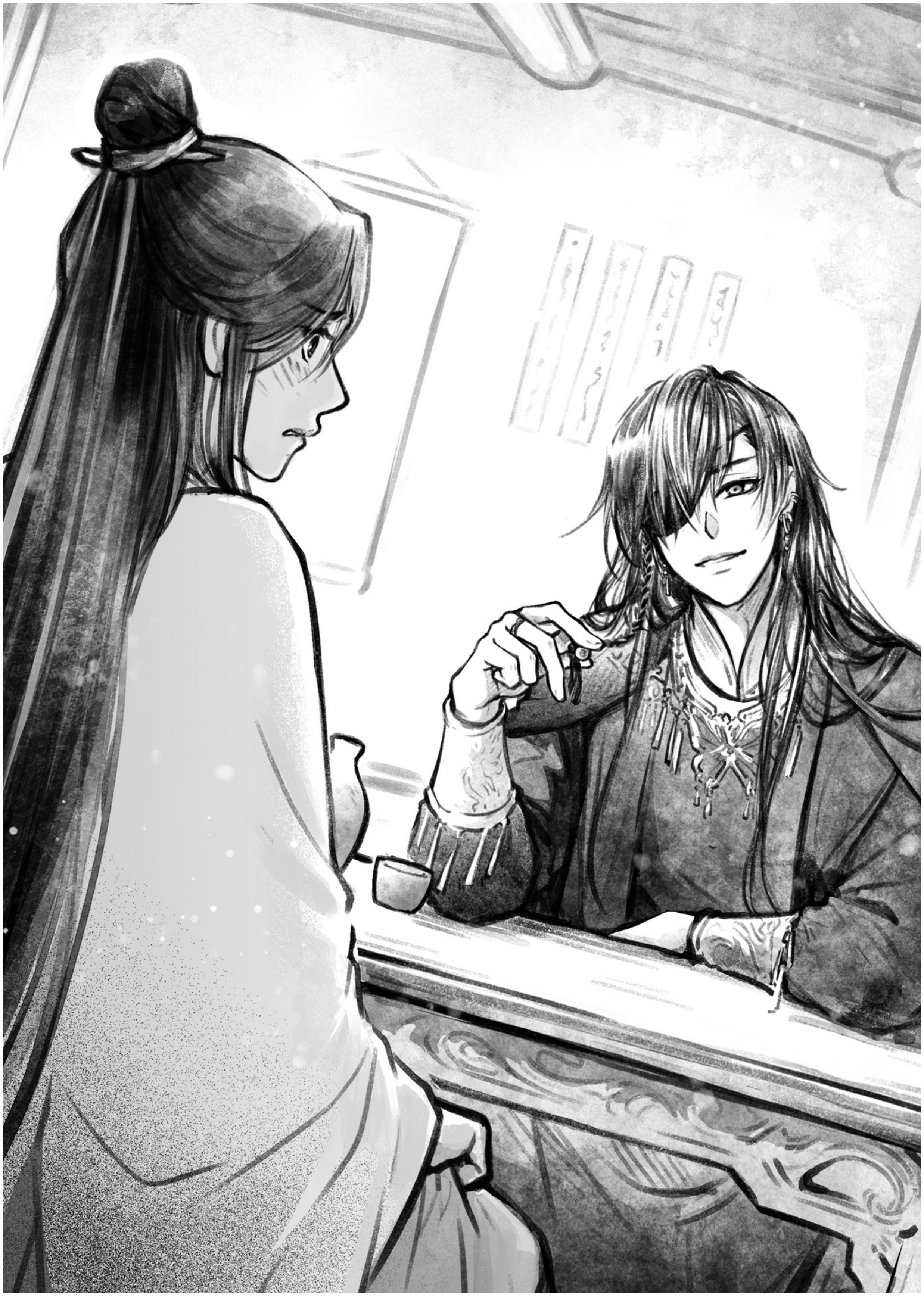
“Oh.” The smile playing on San Lang’s lips was undiminished. “*This* bead?”

He started toying with the brilliant coral pearl with increased fervor and continued with a smile, “This was a gift from my beloved spouse. What do you think of it, Daozhang?”

“…Uh—” Xie Lian was gagged into momentary silence. “It’s…very nice, very nice.”

He had no idea what he was saying, none at all. The hands he’d settled on his lap were clenched into fists, and he felt like he was sitting on needles.

This stranger in red was clearly just playing with that pretty, delicate bead—it was a simple act. And yet Xie Lian could sense an undercurrent of lasciviousness. It was like the jewel he held between his fingers and rubbed so slowly, so gently, wasn’t a red pearl at all but some sensitive part of his body. Xie Lian felt his face grow inexplicably hot, and his breathing turned harsh. He was in a miserable state.



This wasn't normal. This was definitely not normal.

As handsome as this man in red—this "San Lang"—was, there was an inexplicable evil aura that surged around him and made Xie Lian want to shudder. Alarms blared in his head, and he forced himself to calm, steadying his breathing.

Staring dauntlessly at the man, he asked, "May I ask for what purpose my lord has approached me?"

San Lang flashed a smile. "Why so cautious? It wasn't for any particular reason. I was simply enchanted by your striking grace and couldn't resist coming over. That's all," he explained unhurriedly. "Please forgive me if I have offended you in any way, Daozhang."

"…"

Xie Lian turned his eyes away, not knowing whether to believe him. He was beginning to regret letting this man sit across from him and cause such confusion in his mind.

The songstress had packed up. She gave a bow to the crowd and flashed Xie Lian a sweet smile before gracefully making her exit. With her gone, there was no reason for Xie Lian to stay either.

"Farewell. Take your time and enjoy your wine, my lord," he said as he rose to his feet. "At your leisure."

He had intended for his parting words to come out sharply, but they were nonetheless delivered with courtesy when they reached the tip of his tongue. Not daring to look at the man in red a moment more, Xie Lian practically ran down the stairs.

He wandered the streets randomly for a while and only breathed a sigh of relief when he was sure no one had followed him. But when he stopped to rest, he felt lost.

His clothes were gone. His belongings were gone. His sword was gone. His servants were gone. Even his spiritual power was gone. Not once in his seventeen years of life had he ever found himself like this—completely adrift with no idea what to do.

Xie Lian shook off those thoughts and stopped a passerby to ask where he was. The passerby answered his question, but it was a place

Xie Lian had never heard of.

“Might I ask how far the royal capital is from here? And in which direction it is located?” he asked.

He didn’t specify that he was referring to the royal capital of Xianle.

“The royal capital? We’re south of the capital. And gosh, plenty far from it!” the passerby replied.

As Xie Lian had suspected. The local dialect and style of architecture were unfamiliar and a little strange; they weren’t much like those of the capital or the regions nearby. He had already guessed that this must be a very faraway place. Why would the perpetrator bring him all the way here?

Xie Lian walked for a while longer before he came upon a new struggle: he was hungry.

But as mentioned previously, all of his belongings were gone—including his money. Any tokens he could have used to prove his identity as a crown prince had also vanished without a trace. He had come up empty earlier when he tried to rummage in his clothing for gold foil to offer the Lord of Soil and Ground, and the tiny number of coins he’d scrounged everywhere for had been spent on a seat at the teahouse, where he’d stayed for a while…but all for nothing, as he couldn’t stand the stains in the teacup and didn’t drink even a sip. His stomach had remained empty.

Truly, a hero could be defeated by a penny.

Just as he was frowning over this difficulty, he noticed something shimmering on the ground ahead, beside a loose brick.

Xie Lian went over and crouched down to flip the brick over. How curious—to his shock, some pieces of gold foil had been dropped on the ground in this dingy little alley!

In addition to gold foil, there were also pieces of silver foil and some miscellaneous coins. Finding money on the ground in broad daylight, a free lunch falling in his lap—he honestly couldn’t tell if this was good luck or bad.

Xie Lian’s first reaction after collecting the pile of money was to wonder if this had been dropped by some unsuspecting person, so he walked out of the alley and called out to the passersby on the street.

"Excuse me, did anyone drop their money?"

Most people shook their heads, but there was an idle good-for-nothing lout who came over looking sheepish, saying "I did! I did!" When Xie Lian asked him to confirm how much he dropped, however, he hemmed and hawed and ran off amidst a laughing crowd.

Xie Lian stood there and waited patiently, worried that the rightful owner would come back in search of his lost money, yet no such person approached even after he waited for nearly two hours. His hunger was becoming more and more apparent, and after a long time, he let out a sigh.

He glanced at the money in his sleeve. *Why don't I just borrow a bit of it and return it ten times over afterward?* he thought.

There was no other option at this point. Thus, after waiting another incense time, he bought a steamed bun at a streetside stall.

Xie Lian had never eaten steamed buns before, never mind ones made with such crude dough—it looked so big and stupid and bland. Nevertheless, he didn't want to use too much of the money he'd found; it'd be terrible if it turned out to be someone's emergency fund, so he only used the bare minimum.

It certainly was a novelty to have such a humongous steamed bun in his hand for the first time in his life. He walked past the alley and came to a smaller, quieter street. Just as he was about to take a bite of the bun, however, a hand suddenly swiped it from him.

It was a fantastic steal—Xie Lian had only paused for a moment, then the bun was gone. When he turned his head, the one standing next to him was the man in red from the teahouse!

Xie Lian was stunned speechless. He had never expected this man to follow him all the way here—or to steal his steamed bun! He was dumbfounded for a while before it occurred to him to reclaim it.

"Give that back!" he cried as he jumped.

His grab was extremely fast, but the man was faster—not to mention taller—so the attack was swiftly dodged.

"Don't eat this," the man said. Then he took a bite out of the bun, leaving a gap behind.

Now Xie Lian couldn’t eat that bun even if he wanted to—there was no way that an esteemed crown prince could eat a steamed bun that someone else had taken a bite out of.

Eyes wide, he exclaimed, *“You—!”* He was left momentarily stumped, then griped angrily, “Why are you like this?”

And to think he had assumed the man was a rare character, someone worthy of befriending. It turned out he was a capricious lout!

Their two figures, one red and one white, moved so fast it dazzled the eyes—no one would believe such an exciting fight was over a steamed bun. Although Xie Lian vaguely suspected that he could be faster, fast enough to keep up with this San Lang, there was something he was missing, something he wasn’t quite grasping, and his limbs weren’t really obeying his control. Moreover, he had spent the entire day tired, annoyed, confused, and achy all over.

Distracted by his fury, he twisted his foot and fell. A quiet yelp of pain escaped through the cracks of his teeth.

It hurt.

An unspeakable pain was spreading from an unspeakable place. This pain had already been there, but it wasn’t obvious—the injury had been carefully tended to at some point, and Xie Lian had tried to ignore it. However, his face changed instantly after the fall, and San Lang’s face changed too as he immediately bent down to catch his arm.

“Ge—” he blurted, but quickly cut himself off and said instead, “Are you all right?”

Mortified, Xie Lian desperately wanted to dig a hole and bury his head in it. “Please don’t refer to me by any random address!” he exclaimed with a burning face, yanking his hand back. “And don’t grab me like that either!”

San Lang let him go, but the gesture was only for show, as he swiftly clutched Xie Lian’s shoulder instead.

“How are you? Does it hurt anywhere?”

He sounded genuinely, deeply concerned. “One does not slap the face of the smiling,” or so they say; by all rights, Xie Lian should have been grateful for the kindness. But when he thought of where it hurt and why, he was both embarrassed and upset, and the frustrations he'd pent up all day finally spilled over. He slapped San Lang's hand away and scrambled to his feet on his own.

"…I don't hurt anywhere—I don't hurt at all!"

He turned and tried to run off, but the man behind him caught his wrist and he couldn't struggle free no matter how he tried. Unable to endure it any longer, Xie Lian whipped around, his eyes round with rage—yet he was met with the sight of San Lang gazing deeply at him.

San Lang let out a soft sigh. "It's my fault, Daozhang. The blame for everything lies with me alone, so please accept my apology and don't be angry with me anymore. How about this: won't you let me treat you to another drink to make it up to you?"

For some reason, whenever Xie Lian saw this man's face, his heart fluttered. He wasn't used to the feeling, and it only made him want to run.

"I don't need you to take me anywhere. I never drink! Let me go, *now*!"

"Okay, okay, okay," said San Lang. "No drinks. How about a meal, then? Surely you must be hungry?"

Xie Lian was so mad. What was that tone? He was practically cooing to him like he was placating a child. He'd never suffered such humiliation before.

"I don't need you to take me out to eat either. I'm not hungry. Please watch your tongue and show some respect!"

But the awkward thing was, as soon as he'd spoken, a weak protest grumbled from his stomach. Xie Lian froze, then grew even angrier, so angry that his face turned red. Even his speech started to stutter.

"You…you…why are you pestering me? Stop pestering me!"

However, San Lang only stared hard at him. "Daozhang, you didn't notice?"

His sudden severe expression had Xie Lian asking, "Notice what?"

"There's an evil creature on you," San Lang said.

Xie Lian was shocked. Without warning, his wrist went slack and that wristband-like silk bandage slithered down his hand like a white snake. It raised itself up to eye level with him, and then—it lunged!

The man in red caught it in an instant before its strike could land.

“See?”

“…”

The white silk band squirmed like a choked venomous snake—it was creepy. And this monster had been hiding on him all this time! Xie Lian understood at last.

He blinked, then said, “So…you approached me because you detected this evil creature hiding on me?”

San Lang’s expression had gone much more serious and severe. “Yes. This creature is quite strange, which was why I was keeping an eye on it. Thank goodness it didn’t hurt you.”

Now the truth was out—it was clear that San Lang had approached him out of goodwill. Recalling how rude he had been to this gentleman, pulling faces and slapping his hand away, made Xie Lian embarrassed.

He bent forward into a solemn bow. “Thank you very much, sir. I was mistaken earlier.”

Before he could fully bend at the waist, San Lang stopped him. “Please. It was nothing.”

Xie Lian looked up, feeling somewhat confused. He got the impression that although this man in red appeared wholly serious, his eye was full of smiles. He figured that it was because he’d shown the man the absolute state of disarray he was in, and also his uncouth behavior… It was a little embarrassing.

Though, it was strange. Xie Lian was far more restrained and dignified than most others his age, yet the mere sight of this man rendered him restless and agitated.

San Lang didn’t seem to notice his discomfort, though, and said, “Since all is resolved, then I shall be on my way. Daozhang, shall I see you next time?”

“Yes, see you next time,” Xie Lian replied without thinking.

San Lang waved, then turned around and left. Despite himself, Xie Lian followed for a few steps.

Maybe it was because he really didn’t know where to go, or maybe because his mind was addled, but Xie Lian only snapped out of it when San Lang looked back. He was startled out of his reverie and stopped abruptly, pretending to look elsewhere. But it was already too late.

The light laughter from up ahead embarrassed Xie Lian so badly that his earlobes turned red. He forced himself to look again, and San Lang was standing there with his arms crossed.

“Let’s not wait for next time,” San Lang said with a chuckle. “I think the time is now. What do you think? Is Daozhang finally willing to have a drink with me?”

***

They returned to the same magnificent restaurant from before.

The man in red with whom Xie Lian had just become acquainted was very generous, and he ordered an entire tableful of the best dishes the restaurant had to offer. Surprisingly, the restaurant’s fare wasn’t any lower quality than imperial cuisine, and many of the dishes were novel recipes that Xie Lian had never seen or tasted before. Ravenous, he ate and ate, and it was some time before he realized San Lang had been watching him unblinking the entire time with his hand propping up one cheek. That gaze almost made Xie Lian feel like he was the dish being eaten.

“…”

His intense regard made Xie Lian jittery again, like he was sitting on needles. Once he was sure he hadn’t forgotten his manners due to hunger, he placed his chopsticks down and softly cleared his throat.

“…Excuse me.”

“Hmm? What needs to be excused? Don’t mind me,” said San Lang. “Please, continue.”

Then, he took out the steamed bun they’d fought over earlier and, without batting an eye, started eating it. Now Xie Lian only felt more embarrassed.

Shifting straighter in his seat, he glanced at the white silk band and decided it was time to discuss serious business.

“Why would this evil creature hide on my person? I’m shocked that I didn’t notice its existence. It was almost as if…”

As if he had been carrying it with him for so long that he’d gotten used to it being there.

The white silk band kept swinging its head and wagging its tail like it was trying to swim over to him. Had it not been kept firmly in place by San Lang, it probably would’ve already wrapped Xie Lian up like a zongzi. It seemed…rather enamored with him.

San Lang pinned it to the table with a chopstick, denying it any chance to tackle Xie Lian. “Seems like this evil creature has some very bad habits, hm? It needs to be trained,” he said with a smile.

“Rather than train it, let’s first figure out exactly where it came from,” Xie Lian said.

The two of them chatted about this, that, and everything. Xie Lian had grown up in the Palace of Xianle and then cultivated at the Royal Cultivation Hall. He had never met anyone so interesting and so knowledgeable. As he listened to San Lang talk, Xie Lian’s eyes were bright and a broad smile painted his face, and he could almost toss all his troubles to the back of his mind. It was a long while before he remembered that he was in the middle of a bizarre maelstrom.

He straightened his expression and said, “San Lang, can I ask you about someone?”

San Lang threw the white silk band to the ground and did something that made it too weak to jump back up. “Who?”

“It’s like this,” Xie Lian said. “I’m looking for someone named Hua Cheng.”

When he heard the name, San Lang quirked an eyebrow. “Hmm. Can I ask what you hope to achieve by finding him?”

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Xie Lian said earnestly. Judging by the man’s tone, he clearly knew who Hua Cheng was, so he added, “Maybe you think I’m lying to you, but it’s true—I don’t know what I hope to achieve by finding him. When I woke up today, I found myself in a very strange state.”

He told the whole story in one breath, leaving out the unspeakable, mortifying details.

“So this man might be a key figure in what happened,” Xie Lian finished. “San Lang, if you know who he is, would you please tell me more, if you don’t mind?”

“Ah, it’s not a matter of whether I mind,” San Lang chuckled. “Daozhang, of course I’ll help you—it already feels like we’ve known each other forever. As for Hua Cheng…”

Xie Lian listened intently, all his attention on the man before him. “Yes?”

“He’s a madman.”

“How is he mad?”

San Lang poured a cup of wine, then picked it up. “He’s a devotee.”

“Whose?”

“The Crown Prince of Xianle.”

Cough, cough, cough. Xie Lian quickly swallowed the tea in his mouth before he started sputtering. “Wait a sec, hang on. I…the Crown Prince of Xianle hasn’t even become a god yet, so how could he be a devotee?”

“He will be, though, sooner or later,” San Lang replied, nonchalant. “Besides, there’s nothing to being a god, really. If you say you’re a god, then you’re a god. If you say you aren’t, then you aren’t. He considers the crown prince a god, and that’s all there is to it.”

“That’s too random!” Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but after a pause, he asked quietly, “…Does he really believe His Highness will become a god for certain?”

“He doesn’t believe,” San Lang said slowly, then his lips widened into a grin. “He knows.”

Xie Lian grinned back, but he thought to himself, *Then I mustn’t let him down.*

He crossed his arms and asked, “So where can I meet this Hua Cheng?”

“Do you really want to meet him, Daozhang?” asked San Lang.

“I do.”

San Lang didn’t seem to agree with that course of action. “But Hua Cheng is an awful person.”

Xie Lian furrowed his brows. “Awful? How so?”

He refused to believe that someone who was so sure he would become a god was a bad person.

“Well…” San Lang started.

Just then, Xie Lian noticed something. Up until now, he’d been very cautious of San Lang, so he hadn’t really looked straight at him. But now that they’d interacted for a while and gotten to know each other, he was finally relaxing a little and let his eyes wander.

One of San Lang’s arms was slung across the railing, his finger tapping on it idly. They were long, slender digits, and the third was tied with a thin red string—a bright red affinity knot.

Xie Lian immediately recalled the chaotic images that flashed through his mind when the songstress sang—two hands with fingers tightly interwoven beneath satin curtains.

Upon the top hand in that image, there was a red string just like that.

Chapter 137:
Extra 2
The Strange Amnesiac Adventures of His Highness the Crown Prince (Part Three)

XIE LIAN'S EYES widened, his face a picture of disbelief.

"What's wrong?" asked San Lang.

As if Xie Lian could utter a word. The deception, the mortification and frustration of being toyed with… His feelings of betrayal mixed with the hot blood rushing to his head.

He slapped the table and ground each word through his teeth. "So… it…was…*you*!"

The table couldn't withstand his strike and splintered to pieces. Thankfully there was no one else on the second floor, otherwise they'd be sent scurrying in fright. Xie Lian had no weapons with him, so he struck out with his palm once more. Nonetheless, San Lang stayed in his seat and merely tilted his head to avoid the attack. The strike landed on the wall behind him instead, and debris crumbled down upon impact.

San Lang remained in place with his arms crossed. He looked up, lightly raising the curtain of his lashes. "Daozhang, what is the meaning of this?"

Xie Lian's face was burning; he couldn't imagine how red it'd gotten. He cracked the knuckles of his other hand and hissed, his voice filled with fury, "You…stop pretending. You know exactly…what you did to me."

San Lang raised his gaze further. "Most unfortunate, but I really don't know what I've done to make you so angry, Daozhang. Please enlighten me?"

"…"

This man dared to make him say it out loud while acting so innocent? How could he possibly say it? How could he talk about *that* in broad daylight?! Xie Lian had never encountered anyone like this before, and he was so angry that his whole body shook from his shoulders to deep inside his heart.

He spat an incoherent string of rebukes as his face grew redder and redder, “Silence! You… I-I’ll beat you to death, you shameless… perverted…dishonorable…you…”

San Lang sighed. “Daozhang, I never expected you to respond to my heartfelt sincerity this way. How am I shameless, perverted, and/or dishonorable?”

Xie Lian finally managed to regain himself somewhat. “Don’t you dare try to deceive me again! That red string on your hand proves that you’re that…that…”

“Oh?” Unflustered, San Lang raised his hand. “You mean this? Is there something wrong with this red string?”

The sight of the string in question felt like a stab. “I saw it,” Xie Lian said. “At that time, your…hand had a red string just like that…”

“What time?” San Lang asked.

“…”

At that moment, Xie Lian really wanted to beat the guy dead—asking him over and over like that, how absolutely abominable! But for some reason, no matter how angry he was, he couldn’t attack him. And he wasn’t being restrained by anything other than his own body!

Just then, several people ran up the stairs, their feet thumping on the floorboards.

“Dear customers, what are you doing?! Don’t randomly smash things!”

Xie Lian turned his head to exclaim, “It’s dangerous here! Go—”

Yet when he saw them, he was stunned again.

These people were all wearing red strings on their hands!

“What’s with all the red strings?” Xie Lian blurted.

“Red string?” one of them replied. “This red string’s just a red string; what’s so special about it? It’s nothing, *quack*—uh, it’s nothing, y’know.”

Now Xie Lian was confused—was tying a red string around one's finger a normal fashion trend in these parts? He turned back to San Lang.

As if he'd seen what he was thinking, San Lang said, "You guessed right, Daozhang. It's a local custom to tie a red string around one's finger. If you don't believe me, look at the crowd on the street below."

Xie Lian's eyes traveled downward, and sure enough, many of the people in the flowing crowd had red string tied around a finger. There were even some who had tied multiple knots.

"What custom is this?" he asked.

San Lang smiled. "Well, it's related to Hua Cheng, now that we're on the topic."

"Huh?"

"He and his beloved have both tied red strings to their fingers, and many people have followed suit in the hope of finding their future spouse or as a symbol of love."

Xie Lian was stunned to learn about this. "So you're saying that… Hua Cheng is a formidable character? He's so impressive that people are obsessed with imitating him…?"

"Well, whether he's formidable depends on who you compare him to," San Lang said. "By the way, Daozhang, you seem to have dropped something. May I pick it up?"

Xie Lian finally realized that he'd made another blunder, and his temper quickly dispersed. He had been maintaining an attacking stance, but now he quickly relaxed it.

"So sorry, San Lang, I was honestly… I'm really sorry. I got ahead of myself and misunderstood you again…"

San Lang had remained relaxed the entire time. He bent to pick something off the floor. "It's fine. Daozhang, did you drop this?"

What he'd fumbled out of the mess on the floor was a single piece of gold foil—it had probably slipped out of Xie Lian's sleeve when he attacked earlier. Xie Lian was just about to answer when San Lang brought the foil close and squinted at it.

"Hmm? This gold foil looks rather familiar."

Then, he unhurriedly took something from a pouch at his waist—another piece of gold foil.

Two matching pieces of gold foil!

"So it was yours?" Xie Lian blurted.

"Mmm, I certainly did drop some money, which was why I went back to look for it…" replied San Lang.

Terrified he was going to misunderstand, Xie Lian said hastily, "San Lang, let me explain…"

"No need to be nervous," San Lang said. "Of course I'll listen to your explanation, Daozhang."

Xie Lian breathed a sigh of relief. "It's like this," he began. "I picked that gold foil up on the road earlier. I wanted to wait for the rightful owner to come back so I could return it, but I waited for over two hours and no one came. And I was just so…"

He hung his head, feeling a little ashamed, and his voice turned small.

"So I…I borrowed a bit of it to buy something to eat. It was that steamed bun… I planned to return the borrowed money multiplied many times over. But regardless of the reason, I still used it without asking. Forgive me."

San Lang was still full of smiles as he listened. "There's no need to be like this, Daozhang," he assured him. "It's only natural for a person to act that way. And aside from the fact that I already intended to invite you for a drink, wasn't I the one who ate the steamed bun in the end? Don't get hung up on little things. But it's quite amazing, don't you think? What a coincidence that you would be the one to find what I lost—truly, this is destiny."

Seeing how understanding he was being, Xie Lian relaxed.

"But, San Lang, you have to be more careful," he chided. "It was gleaming so brightly on the side of the road; how did you miss it? Don't be so careless next time."

The waiter, who had been cowering to the side, spoke up. “Sirs, have you calmed down, *quack*? If so, let’s settle the cost for breaking the table, *quack*!”

“…”

Xie Lian was silent. In his normal life, paying compensation would be nothing to him, no matter how expensive it was. But right now, he couldn’t even afford a single steamed bun.

“It’s fine. Put it all on my tab,” said San Lang.

He was going to voluntarily pay for the damage Xie Lian had inflicted, even though Xie Lian had clearly attacked him first. Xie Lian was so moved by the sweetness and consideration that he was rendered speechless.

He swallowed. “You…”

There was something wrong with the waiter too, looking so cheery when they’d smashed up the place—he even gave them a new, more magnificent table. The two sat back down, and Xie Lian couldn’t help but feel bad, but also grateful.

“Daozhang, from what you said earlier, it seems there’s a backstory. What’s going on? Did someone harm you?” asked a concerned San Lang.

But how could Xie Lian speak of such things? His face flushed in embarrassment again despite having just calmed down, and he replied haltingly, “…It’s nothing…nothing much.”

Yet San Lang pushed, “Won’t you tell me about it? Maybe San Lang can help somehow.”

He might have been coming from a place of goodwill, but Xie Lian felt like his questions were pushing him into a corner, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“It really was nothing…” he said helplessly. “San Lang, can you…not ask anymore…?”

It was so hard to speak of it.

At his request, San Lang didn’t force the issue. “All right. Where were we, then? You wanted to meet Hua Cheng, right?”

Xie Lian regained himself and straightened his expression. “Yes. Does San Lang know a way?”

“Of course,” San Lang said. “But it’s not easy to see him these days.”

“Why is that?”

San Lang pushed the veggies on his plate into a big smiling face with his chopsticks. “He must accompany his beloved, who has apparently fallen unwell recently. He has no time for anything else.”

Just as he thought, this Hua Cheng was a sentimental man too—he placed high importance on his feelings. Xie Lian admired him even more.

“I see. Then how long will I have to wait to meet him?”

“At least three days, at most five,” said San Lang. “I suggest you try to relax, Daozhang. Why don’t you find a place to rest while you wait?”

But I have nowhere to stay, he thought, but San Lang continued speaking.

“If you have no place to stay, why not come to my place? My house is big, and there aren’t many people living in it.”

Unable to resist any longer, Xie Lian said softly, “San Lang, you’re so… You’re such a good person.”

This was the first time he’d ever complimented someone so bluntly, and he felt a little bashful for it—but he honestly couldn’t think of any words that described him better.

San Lang seemed very pleased. “It’s because it feels like we’ve already known each other forever, Daozhang,” he said, smiling cheerily. “Oh yes, there is another thing I forgot to ask; how old are you?”

“I’m seventeen,” Xie Lian replied.

“Ah, seventeen. Younger than me,” San Lang said.

He did look around twenty or so.

Seemingly casually, San Lang continued, “Then that means Daozhang should call me ‘gege.’”

Xie Lian was royalty, a crown prince who commanded the utmost respect. He shouldn’t act so familiar with anyone, much less agree to address this man like a brother. Yet San Lang made him so comfortable and happy, plus he'd never addressed anyone as an elder brother before—it was a novel idea.

"I see. So it's San Lang-gege," Xie Lian said with a smile.

"…"

Maybe it was just Xie Lian's imagination, but San Lang's smile turned a little peculiar when he called him "gege." It was rather hard to describe, but it was as if San Lang's left eye had been set alight—and its blazing gaze was so ardent that Xie Lian could almost feel his skin burn.

He blinked. "What's wrong?"

The horrifying, searing heat subsided in an instant, and San Lang returned to normal. "It's nothing; I was just happy," he said with a chuckle. "There's no one younger than me at home, so I've never heard anyone call me that before."

"Then, if San Lang doesn't mind…I'll continue to address you that way?" Xie Lian said.

San Lang smiled so wide his eye sparkled, yet his lips still demurred. "Oh, of course *I* certainly don't mind. It depends on whether you do, Daozhang."

"Not at all; of course not," Xie Lian said. "San Lang-gege, shall we go to your house now, then? Or later…?"

San Lang put down his chopsticks. "Let's go now. Come with me."

***

San Lang's residence was an extremely spacious, extravagant mansion. When Xie Lian entered, he thought it was almost the equal of some of the garden palaces within the greater imperial palace of Xianle, which only further cemented the fact that San Lang was no ordinary man.

As Xie Lian lay alone in bed that night, he tossed and turned. He was mired in a storm of outrageous, hazy dreams. He wanted to move, but someone was pinning him firmly down. The voice that whispered in his ear was sometimes a man’s, sometimes a boy’s. Sometimes it called him “Gege, gege,” and sometimes it called him “Your Highness” as it coaxed him, *“Don’t be afraid, Your Highness.”*

It was intensely gentle, intensely evil—and all throughout, he felt intensely cherished by the one he was with.

Xie Lian woke with a start, his clothes completely soaked with sweat. He clenched his fists and panted. Feeling both furious and powerless, he punched the bed violently and tangled his fingers in his slightly damp hair.

When will I be able to forget about this?! Just wait. When I catch that shameless jerk, I’ll definitely…

He noticed then that there was a set of clothing laid next to his pillow that he’d never seen before—robes in his favored white color, and they were even in the style he preferred. Greatly relieved, Xie Lian hurried to the back of the room to take a quick bath.

Stripped and soaking in the water, he discovered that he had a fine, thin silver chain around his neck. A crystal-clear ring hung at the end of it. He didn’t know how long he’d been wearing it, but he hadn’t noticed it at all.

Do I have a pendant like this? he wondered. The ring was genuinely so beautiful that he stared at it, mesmerized—but that didn’t mean he dropped his guard.

A silver glint flashed by.

“Who’s there?!” Xie Lian shouted.

He struck the water and sent forth a splash that scattered like iron pellets, hitting the wall with resounding rat-a-tat bangs. Yet his attack didn’t reveal a person but…a scimitar?!

He held the sturdy blade up to inspect it, incredibly confused. Suddenly, a silver line on the hilt opened like an eyelid, and the eyeball beneath started spinning.

This shocked Xie Lian even further. What was this strange thing?!

The scimitar had a long, slender body, and it seemed almost alive—it enthusiastically tried to throw itself into Xie Lian’s arms over and over.

Caught off guard, Xie Lian let it succeed in its endeavor, yelping and shuddering at the cold metal pressed against him.

Perhaps it was because he didn't sense any killing intent, but Xie Lian's instincts told him that this scimitar posed no danger. He didn't want to react harshly toward it, send it beyond the clouds with a slap or anything like that, but this reluctance left him constantly—and arduously—trying to push it away.

Just then, a red shadow flashed in and snatched up the scimitar.

"So *this* is where you were…"

Xie Lian looked up to see that San Lang was standing next to the bathing pool with the scimitar choked in his hold. Although a smile still hung upon his face, faint veins had surfaced on his forehead.

He gave the scimitar a hard smack. "Didn't I say you're not allowed to be in here right now?" he admonished.

"San Lang, is that scimitar…your spiritual weapon?" Xie Lian asked.

San Lang turned toward him, the veins on his forehead disappearing in an instant and his calm, composed demeanor regained.

"It's nothing but a worthless piece of scrap," San Lang said. "Gege…your gege made a fool of himself. Please excuse me."

Xie Lian, however, looked at him with bright eyes and immense respect. Catching the hem of San Lang's red robe, he exclaimed, "No, no, no. San Lang-gege, you're amazing! I can't believe you forged a spiritual weapon like this, one that possesses its own consciousness!"

The scimitar's eye had scrunched up after San Lang had smacked it, its grievance plain to see, but it was set happily spinning once more by Xie Lian's praise. It tried again to sidle toward him, but San Lang coldly gave it another smack—and it simply would not have it. It collapsed to the floor with a *thud* and started rolling back and forth, looking for all the world like a small child bawling after being spanked by an adult. Xie Lian could almost hear its loud crying voice, and he felt a little sorry for it. He quickly stood up.

"Wait, San Lang! Let it go—don't hit it anymore. I'm sure it was just being a little mischievous as it paid me a friendly visit. There's no need to be so hard on it.”

It was only after he emerged from the bathwater that he remembered he was naked. His face turned intensely red again, and he sank back down awkwardly. However, San Lang had already turned around with artless ease and left.

Xie Lian quickly climbed out of the water and changed into the new robes. He was even more grateful when he felt the superbly fine material of the underclothes—at last, he wouldn’t feel so chafed anymore.

When he left his room and went to the receiving hall, San Lang was already at the head seat waiting for him.

Xie Lian didn’t know how San Lang had disciplined his scimitar, but it was behaving as it hung at his waist. When it wasn’t moving, it had a surprisingly cold and murderous appearance—it was hard to imagine that it had just been rolling on the ground making a scene.

San Lang smiled when he saw Xie Lian. “You’re up? Did you sleep well last night?”

“I don’t know why I was disturbed by dreams for the first half of the night…but the second half was fine,” Xie Lian answered honestly.

“Maybe you were too tired,” San Lang replied.

The two made idle chitchat and sparred for a few easy rounds; that was how they spent the whole day. He expected that they’d pass the time this way until Hua Cheng was available to meet him.

However, when Xie Lian lay alone in bed that night, he once again had that heated, restless dream.

He tossed and turned this way and that, and after he’d had enough, he jolted awake completely drenched with sweat once again. Angry and helpless, he had to get up for some fresh air. He wanted to take a stroll to calm down, but then he suddenly heard voices coming from a house at the far side of the complex.

It was San Lang’s master residence. The sound insulation of the house was excellent and the voices were quiet, but Xie Lian had keen senses and caught the noise. He held his breath and went over silently.

Peering through the crack of the door, he saw San Lang sitting in the head seat inside. He held a brush and seemed to be writing—his expression was cold, completely different than it was when he was with Xie Lian. Beside him, there was a black-clad man wearing a ghost mask who bent at the waist as he made a report in a low voice.

Xie Lian didn't know why, but the man in the ghost mask had barely any presence—he could easily go completely unnoticed if one wasn't careful. The man in the ghost mask had already mostly finished his report when Xie Lian began listening, so he only caught some scattered words here and there: *"That monster has been causing trouble for a long time," "He might've gotten into an accident when he went out to handle prayers," "This is the location I've pinpointed,"* and other such things.

He was still trying to process what he'd learned when he heard San Lang say, "I need to attend to him right now and can't leave. Catch that monster before tomorrow night and bring it to me."

"Yes, sir. Shall I leave it one last breath?" the man in the ghost mask asked quietly.

San Lang put down his brush and glanced at what he'd written, which he then crumpled up and tossed away, apparently dissatisfied.

"Leave it a few. Make it spit out what it swallowed, then crush its worthless head to dust. Make it slow and painful."

His tone and his expression were both quite frightening, yet Xie Lian didn't find him repulsive or alarming.

The man in the ghost mask acknowledged San Lang's order and was about to take his leave, so Xie Lian quickly dodged away and hid.

When he made it back to his room, Xie Lian was even more wide awake than before. He paced back and forth, wondering, *Who exactly is San Lang? What is that monster he spoke of?*

It sounded as though some monster that had been causing havoc for a long time had swallowed something important, and San Lang was very angry about it—but he couldn't head out and smash the monster's head in because he had to stay with Xie Lian.

That thought made Xie Lian feel awful. San Lang was truly treating him with the utmost courtesy.

Suddenly, a light turned on in his head—why did he have to just sit around? There was no meeting Hua Cheng for a while, and he'd been wanting to do something for San Lang, his good gege. Why not go seize that monster for him?

His mind made up, Xie Lian got started immediately. He left behind a letter that said "Do not worry, San Lang-gege. Lian will be back soon," and other such things. Then he leapt out and silently left the magnificent mansion behind.

The location the man in the ghost mask reported wasn't difficult to find. It was many kilometers south, inside a particular cave within a particular mountain. Xie Lian was confident that no ordinary human could match his speed, so he would definitely reach it faster than San Lang's subordinate.

Sure enough, two hours later, he arrived at the mountain in question and charged right up, smashing and punching wildly at random, leaving wailing ghosts and spirits in his wake until he finally found the cave he was looking for.

Although the monster put on quite the show by having three or four hundred minions guarding its door, against Xie Lian, there might as well have only been three or four. He didn't act recklessly at first because he was worried that the opponent was formidable, but after patiently watching the cave from nearby, Xie Lian learned from the gossiping minions that the monster had been having a rough couple of days too.

"Yeah, yeah, Shanzhu went through a lot of trouble escaping from the hands of a foul cultivator—he was scared half to death! He was injured and went back to his old cave, but he fled as soon as he got there, scared shitless. Then he came here."

"I see! I was gonna ask why he called everyone out here. So it's because he's scared of that cultivator coming after him for revenge!"

"But he shouldn't be, you know? Shanzhu took a few big bites out of the guy, so he must be completely lost even if he did manage to wake up."

“How could he *not* be scared? Shanzhu is a great, renowned yao, centuries old, but apparently that cultivator popped up out of nowhere and smacked him silly with only a couple strikes. If the cultivator hadn’t been injured somehow and given him an opening, Shanzhu would probably be lost to us today.”

“Holy… Where’d that random cultivator come from? How’s he so strong?!”

At that point, Xie Lian felt it was time. He emerged and strolled up to them, fully at ease, and greeted them with an amiable, “Hello.”

The minions jumped.

“Who are you?!”

“Where’d this little pretty boy come from?”

Xie Lian gave them a smile. He didn’t bother explaining before he went straight for the kill, moving toward the cave as he did. Even without spiritual power, he caught many of them in simple, casual grabs, and they were tossed hundreds of meters away with equally casual throws. The minions were reduced to screaming, terrified wrecks.

“What’s with that pretty boy?! He looks so gentle, so how is he such a brute?!”

Like he was pulling weeds along the road, Xie Lian stepped into the cave without a single obstruction. He had been prepared for a huge battle with a renowned yao, yet when he went inside the cave, all he saw was a monster in human form rolling around on the ground, groaning and crying in pain while clutching its stomach.

At first, Xie Lian thought it was only faking it, but a closer look proved otherwise—its stomach was massively distended as if it’d swallowed something horrific.

Xie Lian crouched next to it. “What’s wrong?”

The monster was probably too far gone from the pain. As soon as it saw Xie Lian, it shouted, “*You!* Perfect timing! I don’t want to eat it anymore; I don’t dare to! I’ll never do it again! I’ll return what I’ve swallowed to you! I can’t digest it—it *can’t* be digested!”

“I think you’ve got the wrong person,” Xie Lian said. “You didn’t swallow anything of mine, so what would you be returning?”

But the monster only writhed in agony, unable to answer. Puzzled, Xie Lian absentmindedly wrote out a talisman, thinking it’d be best to capture and seal the monster first—but when he slapped the talisman onto the creature, to his amazement, it transformed into a ridiculous-looking round budaoweng with a belly much bigger than any normal doll’s.

Although Xie Lian was surprised, he also found it hilarious. He looked at the talisman that he had written, confused as to how the spell turned out this way. Had he made a mistake? But it wasn’t a problem; the battle had been a cakewalk, and Xie Lian left the deep mountains with the early morning sunlight overhead. He tucked the budaoweng doll in his sleeve and hurried back toward the city.

He had finally managed to do something for San Lang. In a cheerful mood, Xie Lian was already thinking about how he would show off the monster he’d captured to San Lang—he told himself to tamp down on his pleased expression if he wanted San Lang to be surprised.

After an entire night of toil, his feet were tired, so Xie Lian found a random stall to sit in and got himself a bowl of free tea water.

As he drank, he heard someone behind him call, “Xie Lian!”

Xie Lian immediately put down the tea bowl. Who was so audacious as to call his name out directly in public? There were very few who could act so disrespectfully, even among the members of the royal family. Who was it who did not address him with the full awe, reverence, and respect due to him as His Royal Highness the Crown Prince?

When he looked back, he was surprised to see that the speaker was a commoner; he was walking with long strides and carrying a large wooden chest.

“Wait! Hold up!” he shouted. “You forgot Xie Lian! Take him with you too!”

So the man wasn’t calling to him, but someone with the same name—but now Xie Lian was even more puzzled. Even though he’d never care about royal naming taboos or any of that, he was still shocked that someone dared to have the same name as him.

But he soon learned that the “Xie Lian” the man spoke of wasn’t a person.

There was a burly man sitting near Xie Lian, and the man with the chest went to sit down beside him.

“I brought Xie Lian over,” he said, patting the chest. “Remember to bring it to the other half you worship in your house—today! Don’t dismiss it as a superstition; it’ll spell great misfortune if they aren’t placed together!”

“Of course, of course—I know that…”

Xie Lian couldn’t hold back anymore. “Excuse me…” The two men looked at him, and he continued, “Pardon my forwardness, but may I ask what’s in the chest?”

“Didn’t I already say? It’s Xie Lian,” said the man.

Xie Lian was confused. “But…isn’t Xie Lian His Highness the Crown Prince?”

The two seemed to find him funny. “No one said he’s not the crown prince; of course he is,” the man replied. “See?”

He opened the chest, and Xie Lian’s eyes bulged. There was a small shrine within, and a dusty divine statue was venerated inside it—a cultivator dressed in white, wearing a bamboo hat on his back.

He didn’t recognize this idol. Xie Lian couldn’t understand it at all.

“…Are you saying that this divine statue is the Crown Prince of Xianle, Xie Lian?”

“Who else would it be?”

A crowd began to surround them; half had been attracted by what a novelty he was. “What a strange young man. You look like you’re a cultivator too—how do you not know something so simple?”

The other half of the crowd had come to check out the divine statue.

“Wow! That’s a pretty decent Scrap Immortal! Looks sufficiently depressing.”

“Yeah! Look how woeful and dejected it is. That’s obviously the face of bad luck!”

“Very good, excellent! The worse it looks now, the better it’ll look when the other one helps it break free! You’ll see the results in eight days, tops.”

Xie Lian was completely lost. “…Scrap Immortal? What do you mean, he’s a Scrap Immortal?”

“Daozhang, you really are strange!” the crowd replied. “Xie Lian was originally a scrap collector, you know!”

“…”

Xie Lian wasn’t someone who got angry easily, but right now, he was starting to feel a little vexed. No one wanted to hear others say they were a lowly collector of junk. He shot to his feet and said darkly, “Do you have something against the royal family of Xianle? Even if you do, it doesn’t seem very proper to insult the crown prince this way, does it?”

The crowd exchanged looks of dismay, then laughed.

“What are you saying? Proper by which country’s standards? Xianle fell over eight hundred years ago!”

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Two hours later, Xie Lian’s mind was still spinning as he walked down the street.

It was too much. Everything he’d just learned was too frightening for him.

How could the Kingdom of Xianle have been destroyed? Father and Mother are perfectly well. And how can they say I was the one who destroyed it? I lost a war? I destroyed my own kingdom? I was banished twice? I became a scrap collector?

He went through it again and again, and told himself over and over: *Impossible. Impossible. Absolutely impossible!*

He wanted to convince himself that none of it was true, that some evil mastermind must be orchestrating all this. But all the vague abnormalities—the odd dialects, the odd dress, the odd architecture, even the odd Feng Xin and Mu Qing—they were all telling him that this wasn't a bad dream or some sort of illusion. There was no nefarious creature that could cast such a grand and realistic spell.

Eight hundred years really had passed.

How had eight hundred years passed?

How had he ended up like this after eight hundred years?

The Kingdom of Xianle had fallen, his parents were dead, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had ascended…and he'd become a scrap collector.

How had it turned out this way?

It couldn't have. It *shouldn't* have!

Xie Lian walked faster and faster until he broke out into a run, as if there were an infinite darkness on his tail about to devour him whole.

Suddenly, a red shadow appeared—and a tall, slender figure stopped in front of him.

"Daozhang, where are you going? I've been looking everywhere for you."

It was San Lang. Forever smiling, he approached and tried to take his hand, but now the sight of him made Xie Lian's hair stand on end.

"Don't come near me!" he shouted.

San Lang faltered but retained his unbothered air. "What's wrong?"

Clenching his hands into hard fists, Xie Lian asked coldly, "Who exactly are you? What do you want?"

"I thought we had a nice conversation yesterday and decided that those small details were no longer worth discussing?"

"You lied to me," Xie Lian said.

After a brief silence, San Lang asked, "Have you already found out?"

"Yes," Xie Lian said. "That the present time is…"

Eight hundred years later.

It shouldn't have taken him this long to notice all the things that were wrong, but this man had been keeping him in the dark on purpose, which made him lose his bearings. Otherwise, how would it take him an entire day to discover the truth?

San Lan took a step forward. “Your Highness.”

Xie Lian backed many steps away. “Don’t get near me!” he barked. “Take one more step, and I’ll hit you!”

His voice and body were both shaking in terror. He wasn’t scared of some hellish ghost, nor was he afraid of this man who appeared both evil and divine—he was terrified of this entirely foreign world. In this world, he possessed neither pride and glory nor loyal subordinates, nor parents who loved him, nor his kingdom, nor devotees who adored him. He had nothing, nothing, *nothing*!

San Lang still took another step toward him. “Don’t be afraid, Your Highness.”

“…”

Xie Lian’s face changed when he heard him. He suddenly recalled the man in his fragmented dreams who had whispered next to his ear, *“Don’t be afraid.”*

How had he not realized it?

That tone and their voices were exactly the same!

Xie Lian was convulsing with anger. “It was you… It really was you…”

This man had deceived him and made him go around in circles, made him weep with gratitude, filled him with good feelings and had him call him “gege.” The mere thought of it sent an unstoppable rage surging through Xie Lian, and he struck out.

“You liar!”

His strike hit San Lang squarely in the chest. But as Xie Lian tried to strike again, he found that he couldn’t move a muscle—his own body had stopped him!

Xie Lian didn’t understand what was happening, and San Lang caught his hand amidst his confusion.

Startled, Xie Lian gritted out, “Do *not* touch me! You liar. You lied to me. I will *never* trust you again. You—”

“Your Highness, trust me,” San Lang said gravely.

Xie Lian was furious. “I won’t! I…!”

But in the same way he’d been unable to attack, the words “I don’t trust you” refused to pass his lips. The concern and pain in this man’s eye were real and true, without a doubt. No one who witnessed such an expression would question its sincerity.

As if to isolate Xie Lian from the foreign world he so feared, San Lang finally pulled him into his arms. He pressed his lips to his head to brush kisses through his hair as he whispered softly and gently, “Don’t be afraid, Your Highness. It’s all in the past. Your Highness, you’ve already made it through.”

“…”

It was a long time before Xie Lian ceased his resistance and went slack in his embrace.

Tossing aside his mortification, when Xie Lian really thought about it, the man’s voice that called to him in the fragmented dreams was always extremely gentle, without a shred of coercion. As for himself…although there had certainly been pleas and weeping, he could tell that he hadn’t been reluctant in the least.

The only reason he hadn’t noticed until now was that he simply hadn’t wanted to face it.

Xie Lian finally understood why he couldn’t help but want to trust this man at first sight. The relationship between San Lang and the him of eight hundred years later was probably…not so simple. He fully gave up on fighting his body and went along with what his heart wanted.

With his face buried in San Lang’s chest, his voice was muffled when he began to speak. “We’re…”

“Mmm,” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian was silent for a long time before he mumbled, “Why…have I suddenly forgotten everything that happened over the last eight hundred years?”

"It was my fault," San Lang replied. "Two evenings ago, you suddenly received a prayer in the middle of the night. You left in such a hurry that I hadn't had a chance to restore your spiritual power, nor warn you that your memories would be devoured if that monster bit you."

"That's not your fault at all. I was the one who screwed up," Xie Lian said.

"Your Highness will never be a screw-up," San Lang said.

Xie Lian gave an arduous smile before saying dejectedly, "Then, San Lang, how did I…let the Kingdom of Xianle be destroyed?"

He so clearly loved his people—he once even had the lofty ambition of making Xianle last for another thousand years.

San Lang hugged him tighter and said firmly, "It isn't your fault."

"How did I fail? How did I become this way?" Xie Lian mumbled.

Who didn't want to undertake a grand enterprise that would shake the world and leave their mark on history? Maybe not one in a million could accomplish such a feat, but Xie Lian had always firmly believed he'd be that one. Perhaps that was why San Lang hadn't allowed him to realize that he was eight hundred years in the future.

"You didn't fail," San Lang repeated.

Xie Lian shook his head. "But I don't have any devotees anymore."

"You do."

Just the thought of it made Xie Lian sad. "I'm the Scrap Immortal, a collector of trash. I have no devotees, and no one takes me for a god. Who would respect a god who collects scraps?"

It was completely different from the vision he'd once had.

"Didn't I tell you? You have one devotee," San Lang insisted.

When Xie Lian looked up, San Lang smiled at him. "Your Highness, I told you that you would be able to meet Hua Cheng soon. And now, you've met him."

"…"

Xie Lian gazed at his face, scrutinizing him, then asked with a trace of bemusement in his voice, “San Lang, you… When did you first meet me?”

“A long, long time ago, before your ascension,” Hua Cheng answered.

Xie Lian blinked slowly.

“Your Highness, perhaps the you of right now considers the you of eight hundred years later a failure. Maybe you’re disappointed and can’t accept it,” Hua Cheng said. “But please believe me when I say that’s not true.”

His bright left eye gazed at Xie Lian, and the light there was just as soft as his voice.

“You saved me. I’ve always watched you.

“There are countless people who have seen more success than you, but none of them saved me the way you did, and none of them could possibly accomplish all that you have.

“You have no idea how much courage you’ve given me, or how you allowed me to become who I am today.

“In my heart, you are the only god.”

“And you will forever be my most devoted believer,” Xie Lian said.

It was a long while before Xie Lian took the monster’s budaoweng doll out of his sleeve. It seemed like he made up his mind about something.

“Was this the monster that swallowed my memories?”

Hua Cheng took it from his hands. “So it *was* Your Highness who busted into its new lair.”

Xie Lian nodded. “We’ll have to start here if I want my memories restored, won’t we?”

Sitting in Hua Cheng’s palm, the budaoweng doll opened its mouth wide. A scatter of sparkles flew from the opening like fireflies, dancing as they fluttered around Xie Lian.

“Your Highness, if you touch them, you can retrieve your memory of the past eight hundred years,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian reached toward the sparkling lights. Yet right before his hand could touch them, he paused.

Restoring eight hundred years of memories would be like traveling through them all, like reliving everything—the agony of his heart being pierced a hundred times, the humiliation of utter defeat, the fury of powerlessness.

Although he knew the journey would span only a fleeting instant, his fingertips still trembled.

Hua Cheng stood behind him. It made Xie Lian feel like he was leaning against a solid, supportive wall.

“Don’t be scared, Your Highness,” Hua Cheng said from above him.

Xie Lian tilted his head, and Hua Cheng’s arm wrapped around his waist.

“No matter how long it takes, I will always wait for you. We will meet again. Believe me.”

Yeah. They *would* meet again.

Xie Lian once again reached toward those sparkles. Dots of twinkling light melted into the tips of his fingers. Brightness slowly enveloped his vision, as if something hot was approaching.

Before the light reached him, however, Xie Lian said to Hua Cheng, “I’m so happy I met you.”

The sparkles entered his body and vanished. Xie Lian fell forward slowly, and Hua Cheng caught him.

It was a while before Xie Lian regained consciousness.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Hua Cheng asked quietly, “Gege?”

A warm smile gradually bloomed on Xie Lian’s face, and he reached out to cup Hua Cheng’s cheek. “…We meet again.”

Hua Cheng smiled too. “I did say that you should believe me.”

Xie Lian sighed. “Does this count as waiting for each other another eight hundred years?”

"Didn't I say that I will always wait for you, no matter how long it takes? But…"

Hua Cheng pulled Xie Lian to his feet. As the two stood face-to-face, Hua Cheng squeezed his hands and smiled.

"Right now, I never want to be separated again—not for another minute."

The past couldn't be changed.

Eight hundred years ago, the seventeen-year-old Xie Lian, darling of the heavens, didn't know what the future had in store for him. Fate had given him two doors, and he opened them both—the awe-inspiring first impression upon the Grand Avenue of Divine Might, and the meeting of the evil and the divine at Yinian Bridge.

After that, he would be alone and powerless in the roaring waves of desperate times and struggle through long, tortuous centuries. Pain, anger, disappointment, hatred, despair, madness. His heart would become dead as ashes.

And then, it would be rekindled.

But that, of course, was all in the past.

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"Welcome back, gege."

"Mmm…"

"See? I told you we would meet again. I didn't lie to you."

Xie Lian shot Hua Cheng a look. "Oh, really?"

"Of course," Hua Cheng assured with a smile. "When have I ever lied to Your Highness? After all, as your gege—"

Xie Lian reached into Hua Cheng's robes and pulled out a sheet of paper. "'Lian has no way of repaying San Lang-gege for his care,'" he read aloud. "'Thus, I am willing to do everything within my meager power to alleviate my gege's worries. I will take a temporary leave. Do not worry, San Lang-gege. Lian will return soon.'"

Hua Cheng quirked an eyebrow, not saying a word as he stood with his hands folded behind his back. Once Xie Lian finished reading, he quirked an eyebrow too in imitation of him.

“San Lang-gege, good gege—oh you’re good, aren’t you?”

Hua Cheng burst out laughing. “Isn’t gege already aware of just how *good* I am?”

Xie Lian flushed a little. “I…don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied vaguely. “Anyway, you’ve crossed the line over the last couple of days. Reflect on your behavior.”

“Gege, you can’t be like this,” Hua Cheng said in a stern tone. “I’ve been nothing but courteous for the past forty-eight hours. It’s been very hard holding myself back.”

“How were you *courteous*?” Xie Lian countered. “You were clearly… clearly…”

Clearly having a great time messing with him. When he remembered how he’d spent the last two days—regressed into an innocent, naive, foolish, spoiled, pampered little seventeen-year-old idiot who got played by Hua Cheng over and over—Xie Lian could barely face himself. He groaned, putting a hand over his forehead.

In a serious tone, Hua Cheng added, “It’s true. Even if he got yelled at by gege and called a despicable, shameless, perverted jerk, San Lang has no complaints and no regrets.”

“…”

“Gege, if you’re unhappy, you can yell at him again—San Lang doesn’t mind.”

Xie Lian couldn’t bear to listen anymore. He began to creep away, his hand still over his forehead, and by the time Hua Cheng turned back to him, he was gone.

“Gege? Don’t run away. All right, I screwed up. Gege!”

Stop with the “gege,” already! Jeez!

Chapter 138:
Extra 3
The Ghost King's Bedtime Story

HUA CHENG had fallen ill.

Although it was a minor illness, how very curious it was that ghost kings could even get sick.

When Xie Lian returned to Thousand Lights Temple to check up on Hua Cheng's calligraphy practice as usual, he was highly concerned to find him slightly feverish.

He pushed Hua Cheng onto the altar—ah, yes…since there were no divine statues in the way, the two of them often took a tumble on the temple's spacious altar—then only got more worried after he felt his cheeks and forehead.

"You're so hot."

Hua Cheng laughed. "I always burn hot at the sight of you, gege. If you keep touching me, I'll get bothered too."

Xie Lian blinked, then hastily tried to pretend he was blushing out of anger. "Naughty, even when you're sick…"

"What did I say?" Hua Cheng protested, acting innocent. "I'm very well behaved. Gege, stop worrying. A small thing like this is nothing to be concerned about."

But Xie Lian could hear that his voice was deeper and scratchier than usual, and he could see the slight fatigue that colored his brow.

"Get some rest, then," Xie Lian said. "I'll keep you company here for the next few days until you're better."

He gathered the stationery for writing practice and brought it to the altar. Hua Cheng patted the spot next to him.

"Is gege not coming up to join me?"

But if he went up there, when would Xie Lian have a chance to come back down? At that point, they could forget about doing anything else for a while.

“Nah,” Xie Lian declined politely. “My San Lang has overworked himself.”

“Nah,” Hua Cheng laughed. “How could San Lang ever be afraid of hard work when it comes to working gege hard?”

Xie Lian ignored him, refusing to participate in his games. Instead, he focused on putting together a calligraphy copybook. Hua Cheng flipped onto his side and stared at him, one hand propping up his cheek. His intense, rapt gaze always made Xie Lian blush, no matter how many times he was the subject of it.

“…San Lang, look at the copybook, not at me,” chided Xie Lian, sounding uncomfortable.

Hua Cheng sighed. “Gege, truth be told, just the sight of this stuff makes my head hurt. But since you’re the one who wrote it for me, I can’t bear to look away. Maybe staring at copybooks too much is the cause of my current condition.”

“What *condition* is that?” Xie Lian questioned.

Hua Cheng snickered. “It’s better for my health to look at you instead, gege. You’re a far better sight to stare at than copybooks. Maybe I’ll heal from exposure to you alone.”

Feeling helpless yet amused, Xie Lian put down the brush and shook his head. “Why do you spout so much nonsense these days…? Nothing serious ever comes out of that mouth of yours. All right, fine, I get it—we’ll go with what you want. No more copybooks. What shall we do instead?”

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“We don’t have to do anything,” Hua Cheng said. “Just keep me company like this, and I’ll be better in no time.”

Xie Lian felt Hua Cheng’s forehead again. Although he was a handsome man, the way he was whining made Xie Lian think of a red-cheeked child peeking out of his nest of warm blankets in the winter. Affection and tenderness filled him at the thought.

After some consideration, he said, “How about this? I happened to collect something interesting today.”

He rummaged through his sleeve and fished out an item.

“It’s an old book someone threw away. I was planning to flip through it sometime,” Xie Lian said. “Why don’t I read you a few stories?”

The little book in his hand was very old and ragged, with yellowing pages that gave it a strange air of scholarship. Others must’ve flipped through it countless times before.

But Hua Cheng said, “No.”

“Why not?” Xie Lian asked, curious.

“Books like that are always full of tall tales people spun about the other heavenly officials,” Hua Cheng replied lazily. “And I already know everything about their ancient, sordid trifles. None of that nonsense interests me, so why would I trouble gege to tell me about it?”

That was true—Hua Cheng knew all the terrible secrets of countless powerful figures from across the realms.

“If gege must read something, why not pick another subject?” Hua Cheng said. “Your own story, for example.”

That suggestion made Xie Lian chuckle. “Is there anyone who knows more about me, or has seen more of me, than you?”

“Tell me even *more*,” Hua Cheng pleaded. “I want to hear it. I can’t hear enough about you.”

He was being completely serious—Xie Lian could tell. He carefully brushed away the strands of hair spilling over Hua Cheng’s cheek. As he did so, he inadvertently glanced at the book and exclaimed in amazement, “San Lang, I think this book is about us.”

"Is it?"

Xie Lian flipped through the book again. "It is. It's filled with stories about the Great Red-Robed Ghost King and the Scrap Immortal. That's you and me, right?"

That piqued Hua Cheng's interest. "Oh? What kind of stories?"

Xie Lian was also curious to learn about the tales that common people had crafted about him and Hua Cheng, so he opened the storybook and started reading aloud.

"Once upon a time, there was a Great Ghost King who loved to wear red. Although the Great Ghost King was a powerful man and possessed mountains of gold and silver, he was very unhappy. That was because he was very lonely and yearned for a wife…"

"…"

Xie Lian snorted and laughed aloud, finding it a little hard to continue. "Is the lonely Ghost King waiting in an empty nest…? Ha ha ha…ha ha ha ha…"

Hua Cheng quirked an eyebrow. "It's not wrong. I get very lonely when gege isn't around."

Xie Lian felt his cheeks go hot and kept reading.

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Once upon a time, there was a Great Ghost King who loved to wear red. Although the Great Ghost King was a powerful man and possessed mountains of gold and silver—more than a lifetime's worth of fortune—he was very unhappy. That was because he was very lonely and yearned for a wife.

Although he waited for centuries, there was no sign of his beloved, so he went to request the guidance of an old immortal who was highly skilled in the art of divination.

The Great Ghost King asked the Old Immortal, "Where is my wife?"

The Old Immortal told him, “You and the one you are waiting for will unite in marriage upon a mountain. Your wife will come riding in a marriage sedan and wearing red bridal robes.”

The Great Ghost King was determined to find his wife, so he went to that mountain and waited patiently.

Meanwhile, in a place far, far away, there was a Scrap Immortal.

The Scrap Immortal was a collector of scrap, which was why he was the poorest of the heavenly officials; he was even poorer than many mortals. However, despite his extreme poverty, he was very kind.

One day, on his way home from collecting scraps, the Scrap Immortal saw a girl crying by the roadside.

The Scrap Immortal asked the girl, “Miss, why do you weep so?”

“I am about to marry,” the girl replied tearfully, “but I must cross a mountain on the day I depart, and a Ghost Groom lives on that mountain. He steals brides who pass by; only a few have ever been saved from his clutches. I will be taken and killed!”

The Scrap Immortal was sympathetic to her plight and resolved to rid the people of this evil. He decided to marry in that woman’s stead to vanquish the monster.

The Scrap Immortal had two good friends. Because one was ornery and one was petty, they were called the Ornery Immortal and the Petty Immortal.

As they fought each other with their fists, they explained to him, “The Ghost Groom is a Great Ghost King with a very bad temper, and he is very sly. He detests gods. If you attempt to capture him, you will definitely be eaten!”

But the Scrap Immortal was adamant, and thus, they built him a marriage sedan. On the day of his departure, the Scrap Immortal wore beautiful wedding robes borrowed from Lady Wind Master in order to disguise himself as a bride. He mounted the wedding sedan and was carried up the mountain by his two friends, who fought and attacked each other the entire way.

Wicked gales bellowed in the pitch-black night. When the wedding sedan reached the top of the mountain, there was no one left by the Scrap Immortal's side.

He waited and waited, waited and waited, until his groom finally arrived.

When the Scrap Immortal lifted his bridal veil, he was surprised to discover that the Great Ghost King was an exceptionally handsome young man. Even more surprising was that the young groom was very polite—he was well mannered, gentle, and considerate. He did not remove his human skin to reveal a monstrous true form, nor did he force the Scrap Immortal to do anything untoward. He was nothing like the horrible Great Ghost King of legend.

The mountain was immense indeed, and the Great Ghost King brought the Scrap Immortal to his lair within its depths.

"From this moment onward, I am your husband, and you are my beloved wife," the Great Ghost King said to the Scrap Immortal. "This entire mountain belongs to me, and now to you as well. You can roam wherever you please. However, remember this—on the other side of the mountain, there are two houses that you must never enter."

"Why not?" asked the Scrap Immortal.

His groom, the Great Ghost King, answered thus: "That is my secret; there is no need for you to know. However, it will be impossible for you to enter the houses even if you wish to do so. A barrier is installed at each gate, and you must possess something of mine before you can cross."

"What is that something?" asked the Scrap Immortal.

The Great Ghost King answered, "One house hides filthy trash. To open its door, you must use something of mine found on me by touch—something that is copious in amount. The other house hides a formidable spiritual weapon. To open its door, you must use something of mine not found on me by touch—something that is burning."

Naturally, the Scrap Immortal did not listen. Although he pretended to be compliant and docile in front of the Great Ghost King, the Scrap Immortal snuck off to the other side of the mountain as soon as he left, leaping and flying across walls and roofs. Sure enough, he heard terrifying screams and cries for help coming from the house that hid the filthy trash.

The Scrap Immortal suspected that this was where the missing brides were being confined. Thus, he decided to steal something of the Great Ghost King's to open the mysterious house.

But what was the "something" he needed to steal?

The Great Ghost King had a head of long, shiny, jet-black hair, which was sometimes loose and at other times tied up crookedly. The first plan the Scrap Immortal devised was to steal a few strands every day.

And so, he asked, "May we sleep in the same room?"

"Of course," his groom replied politely. "We are married."

Thus, they moved into the same room. Although they slept in the same bed, the Scrap Immortal refused to allow his groom to strip him of his clothing. Because of this, the Great Ghost King also respectfully refrained from attempting to touch him.

However, the Scrap Immortal soon discovered that not a single strand of hair fell from his groom's head. There was not one loose hair to be found, no matter how many times he brushed his groom's hair in the morning and before they went to bed at night—none on his pillow, the bed, the floor, or the comb!

Now this was becoming a headache. The Scrap Immortal took up a sword, hoping to cut a lock of the Great Ghost King's hair in secret while he slept. However, the Great Ghost King was exceptionally alert, and his eyes shot open as soon as the Scrap Immortal drew near him. Even though he had been caught red-handed, the Scrap Immortal remained calm. To escape the Great Ghost King's suspicion, he immediately cut off a lock of his own hair and gifted it to him.

The Great Ghost King was elated to receive it.

The clever Scrap Immortal soon came up with another idea. He asked the Great Ghost King, "May I kiss you?"

"Of course," his groom replied in delight. "We are married."

Thus, the Scrap Immortal embraced his ghost groom and kissed him hard for a long time. When at last he'd captured a bit of his groom's taste, he quickly shut his mouth and ran to the other side of the mountain.

But when he got there, he discovered that this method wouldn't work—he needed a copious amount of the "something," and what he had taken wasn't enough. He could stick his head into the house, but not his body. No matter how he tried, he still could not enter.

The Scrap Immortal was dejected. He had thought that stealing something found on the Great Ghost King would be an easy task—he never expected it to be so difficult.

The Scrap Immortal thought of his good friend Lady Wind Master and thus paid a visit to the Temple of Wind and Water.

"How do I get a copious amount of something that is found on the Great Ghost King?" the Scrap Immortal asked Lady Wind Master.

Lady Wind Master answered, "Hah! Easy. Transform into a woman and consummate your marriage with him. Done!"

The Scrap Immortal shook his head, for his cultivation method decreed that his spiritual power would be greatly damaged should he lose his virginity. Lady Wind Master's way was no way at all.

Just then, Lord Water Master returned and happened to hear what the Lady had said. "Outrageous!" he barked angrily. "How could you say such indecorous words?!"

And whenever he got angry, Lord Water Master crushed people to death with money, so the Scrap Immortal quickly fled. As he ran, he thought of his two other good friends—Ornery Immortal and Petty Immortal. He decided to ask them what he should do.

Ornery Immortal and Petty Immortal were brawling again. As they fought, they told him some incredible news: because too many people had gone missing, all the heavenly officials would soon attack the mountain together to apprehend the Great Ghost King!

This information shocked the Scrap Immortal, and he became sick with worry. After living with the young Ghost King for many days now, he did not think he would commit such terrible deeds. Perhaps there was a misunderstanding. Perhaps some other creature was the one who had imprisoned those brides.

However, since the Scrap Immortal was very poor and had no status, no one listened to him. The Scrap Immortal was frantic—if the truth wasn't uncovered soon, the Great Ghost King might be attacked by the heavenly officials!

With no other options, the Scrap Immortal ran back and asked the Great Ghost King, "Excuse me, can we consummate our marriage?"

"Of course," his groom answered with a broad smile. "We are married."

And thus, the Scrap Immortal and the Great Ghost King consummated their union. During the act, the Scrap Immortal held on tightly to the Great Ghost King for fear he wouldn't give him copious amounts of the important something.

"Can you give all of it to me? Can you give it to me many times?"

"Of course," his groom replied gently and considerately. "If that is what you wish."

And the Scrap Immortal said, "I do…"

Thus, the clever Scrap Immortal received what he had been seeking—something of the Great Ghost King's that he had found on him by touch and in copious amounts.

The next day, carrying the something he'd begged for from the Great Ghost King, the Scrap Immortal went to the house that hid the filthy trash. This time, he was finally able to enter.

The moment he opened the door, the Scrap Immortal found many filthy, disheveled corpses discarded inside. Some had already decayed and become nothing but bones!

The bodies were dressed in wedding robes—they were probably the missing brides. Hopes dashed, the Scrap Immortal was both shocked and sad.

When he turned his head, he was surprised to discover that there was someone standing behind him.

The Great Ghost King had come before he noticed!

The Scrap Immortal was shocked. He recalled what Ornery Immortal and Petty Immortal had told him—that the Great Ghost King was very sly and that he detested gods. The Scrap Immortal had now lost his spiritual power. Could the Great Ghost King have seen through his identity? Had he been lying to him all this time?

Angry and hurt, the Scrap Immortal fled, running faster with every step. Yet he ran so fast that he spilled what the Great Ghost King had given him, and he was stopped by the barrier at the front of the house.

The Great Ghost King caught up to the Scrap Immortal and captured him in his arms. He then told the whole story at last.

As it turned out, the Great Ghost King didn’t catch and eat anyone; he was only on this mountain to wait for his fated special someone. One day, he was out on a stroll when he came across a wedding escort party. Terrified, the groom ran off on his own and left behind his weeping bride, who was frozen in place with fear.

The Great Ghost King hadn’t intended to cause trouble, but the bride declared that she no longer wanted to marry a man like that. She left to seek a new life instead of going back from whence she came.

Similar incidents happened again and again, and the ghost king decided that he would stay and test the soon-to-be-wedded while he waited for his fated special someone. If a groom dared to step forward and protect his bride from the forces of evil, then the Great Ghost King would not push the matter further and would allow them to pass. If a despicable groom pushed his bride in front of a monster’s gaping maw to buy time for his own escape, then he would be captured and locked inside the house that stored trash.

Because many of those despicable grooms were wicked in nature, they would often attempt to kill each other. Eventually, all that remained of them were piles of white bones. They were the corpses that the Scrap Immortal had seen. As for their brides, some had returned home, some had eloped with lovers and escaped to distant lands, and some had started their own families with a different match.

The Great Ghost King said, “I waited for you for centuries, gege. And you finally arrived.”

With the misunderstanding cleared up, the two embraced each other. In order to leave the house, the Great Ghost King gave the Scrap Immortal more of his something in copious amounts.

Just then, rumbling sounded from the skies. The heavenly officials had been wary of the Great Ghost King for a long time, so they had seized this chance to launch an attack!

The Scrap Immortal charged out, swinging at random, and beat back a wave of heavenly officials. However, the entire mountain had collapsed from the officials' barrage, and the Great Ghost King was buried beneath it.

The mountain was enormous, and the Scrap Immortal tried desperately to brace it upon his shoulders for fear that the Great Ghost King would be crushed completely. It suddenly occurred to him that there was another mysterious house he had yet to open—one that hid a formidable spiritual device that could surely push the great mountain away.

When he rushed to the cave where the house was located, he was surprised and delighted to find that the Great Ghost King was standing inside—perfectly fine and whole, and even stronger than before!

The two broke out of the mountain and beat back the heavenly officials who had come to cause trouble. At the end of it all, they sat atop the summit side by side to watch the clouds and stars left in the fleeing gods' wake.

The Scrap Immortal asked his groom, "Didn't you say that in order to enter the house hiding the filthy trash, I needed something found on you by touch and in copious amounts, but the house that hid the spiritual weapon could only be entered with something not found on you by touch that was burning?"

Wearing a happy smile, the Great Ghost King said, "Yes. But didn't gege have that something all along?"

It dawned on the Scrap Immortal. The burning "something" was the ardent heart with which the Great Ghost King loved him.

Thus, the Scrap Immortal and the Great Ghost King happily went to consummate their marriage once more, never to part again.

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Xie Lian was speechless.

Xie Lian remained speechless.

Even now that the story was done, Xie Lian was still in shock.

"What the heck is this?" he said, incredulous. "Isn't this adaptation way over the line? No, no, no, this…"

What the heck was this nonsense? How was it appropriate for a storybook?!

Meanwhile, Hua Cheng had already fallen over on the bed, laughing.

"This isn't right at all!" Xie Lian exclaimed, completely baffled. "What is this even supposed to be based on? The incident at Mount Yujun? This isn't how it happened at all… It's completely twisted. And…what if a child got their hands on this kind of story? That'd be inappropriate, wouldn't it? Who wrote this?! And what's with all these characters who sound familiar but just slightly off…?"

While the story in the book appeared sweet and innocent at first glance, like a child's bedtime story, upon closer inspection, the plot was incredibly over the top—it was even more depraved than an ordinary spicy story.

Yet there was a peculiar sort of sentimentality at the conclusion, and Xie Lian wondered if there was something wrong with him for feeling moved by it.

Hua Cheng chimed in with his own thoughts. "Hmm? It's not entirely twisted—some parts are correct, at least. For example, I certainly do call you 'gege.' And it certainly was me who went to receive your wedding sedan. And on the night we consummated our marriage, you certainly did —"

Xie Lian had thought he'd built up a thick skin after all these years, yet he still constantly flushed bright red in front of Hua Cheng.

"How did they know about something like that?!" Xie Lian exclaimed. "A-and aside from that, it was all wrong…"

Although he knew it was normal for there to be leagues of difference between folktales and their factual origins—after countless adaptations and rewrites, strange results were hardly unexpected—seeing it for himself still shocked him to the extreme. There had been several points when he'd been too mortified to keep reading, but Hua Cheng had forced him to continue. How aggravating. Oh, how desperately Xie Lian wanted to beat him up, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Hua Cheng didn't find it surprising either. "Obviously, someone involved must have leaked details about the incident. Some rearrangements here, some wrongful conclusions there, and a sprinkle of conjecture on top—voilá, there you have it."

"No more reading rubbish books like these," Xie Lian said, tossing the storybook aside. "Time to rest properly."

However, Hua Cheng only clapped. "But it was so well written; the writer's very talented." Then, he pleaded, "Listening to it made me feel so much better. Won't you read me another, gege?"

"No," Xie Lian refused resolutely.

"Gege, my head hurts."

"But—"

"Gege."

"…All right, fine."

It was rare for Hua Cheng to fall ill, even slightly—and even in the best of times, Xie Lian usually went along with his every whim and granted every single one of his wishes. How could he resist him at a time like this?

Thus, as mortified as he was, he swallowed down his embarrassment and picked up that pervy little book anew. He lay down next to Hua Cheng—whose arm immediately circled around his waist as he did—and forced himself to keep reading.

"Once upon a time, there was a handsome young crown prince who cultivated deep in the mountains. One night, he was greeted by a mysterious guest…"

Chapter 139:
Extra 4
Oh Goodness! The Cave of Ten Thousand Gods

LAUGHING, Xie Lian pushed Hua Cheng off him—his crushing weight was making it hard to breathe. The heat and passion had yet to subside when something suddenly occurred to him.

"Oh yeah, San Lang," he began offhandedly. "About the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods…"

"Hmm?" Hua Cheng replied lazily as he settled his arm over Xie Lian's chest. Once something in particular was in his clutches, his fingers began to twiddle and toy with it. "What about it?"

"Nothing," Xie Lian said. "It just suddenly occurred to me—are the divine statues inside that cave all right after Mount Tonglu's eruption?"

It would be such a shame if anything happened to them. After all, every statue in there was the product of Hua Cheng's blood, sweat, and tears, and Xie Lian loved them all.

"They'll be fine," Hua Cheng said. "I set up a ward a long time ago; the cave would remain intact even if the entire mountain collapsed."

"Really?" This piqued Xie Lian's interest. "They must be fine, then. What a relief. I want to go and take a look at them—is that okay?"

Hua Cheng's expression seemed to falter for a moment before he quickly painted over it with a smile. "Sure, gege," he agreed. "You can go if you want to. What's stopping you?"

"Let's go tomorrow," Xie Lian exclaimed. "The Tonglu area is open now, so we can head out anytime we want."

Hua Cheng quirked an eyebrow. "Tomorrow? All right."

He didn't object to the suggestion, nor did he speak more on the subject. A moment later, however, he flipped Xie Lian onto his stomach and climbed on top of him again.

Maybe it was Xie Lian's imagination, but Hua Cheng seemed to work him even harder and more aggressively the second half of the night. It wasn't even two more rounds before he was forced to cry *"Gege, help me!"* and woozily pass out.

He might have slept soundly until the next morning, but not two hours later, Xie Lian felt a void next to him, even deep in slumber. He opened his eyes a slit and peered at the spot beside him—only to find the man that was next to him missing.

Surprised, Xie Lian sat up at once, any drowsiness leaving him completely.

After quickly making himself decent, he slowly rolled out of bed. As he pushed the door to head out, he wondered, *Where did San Lang go?*

This was the first time Hua Cheng had ever gone missing halfway through the night. Xie Lian searched all of Paradise Manor but found no sign of him. Suddenly, he remembered that there was a room in the manor used for teleportation. When he went there, sure enough, the door of the room had been left ajar.

The array on the door wasn't the same as the one he remembered from the last time he'd come here, and the cinnabar of the new array had yet to dry. Xie Lian went in without a second thought, and when he emerged, it was no longer Paradise Manor—instead, there was nothing but darkness.

Xie Lian closed the door and ignited a palm torch to illuminate his surroundings. When he took in the sight before him, he was shocked.

The teleportation array was connected to an enormous, eerie cavern—it was the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods!

Why had Hua Cheng come here alone in the middle of the night? Didn't they agree to go together the next day? Why had he made this trip alone, in secret?

Xie Lian shook his head. With torch in hand, he started to slowly walk the dim, chilly tunnels.

His footsteps echoed hauntingly. The light silk veils covering the divine statues had been removed, so countless silent faces that mirrored his own stared out from the encompassing darkness. It was a somewhat terrifying sight, if he thought about it. When Xie Lian passed a cavern and glanced in absentmindedly, he saw a divine statue of the God-Pleasing Crown Prince. Its expression was gentle and its form graceful as it stood there, flower in one hand and sword in the other.

There were hundreds of divine statues here, if not thousands. Who knew how much time and effort it had taken to carve them, or how much time had been spent in this silent darkness.

As he thought of that, Xie Lian let out a sigh. Approaching the statue, he inclined his head and murmured, “It must’ve been lonely, huh?”

He was talking about the sculptor, but the statues as well.

The God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue nodded.

“…”

Well, *that* was terrifying.

Xie Lian remained frozen stiff for a while before he realized what had happened. Because he had been recharged with spiritual power very recently, the brimming abundance of it coursing through him had most likely affected the statues and made them move.

He quickly reined in his spiritual power, but it was too late—the God-Pleasing Crown Prince had already taken a step forward. Although Xie Lian’s overflowing spiritual power had affected the statue, he’d made no attempt to issue it any commands, so its movements were slightly awkward. It tripped and fell with a *thud*.

“Careful!” cried Xie Lian as he rushed over to help it stand.

After being helped to its feet, the divine statue’s smile did not falter—it even lifted its chin with lofty dignity and nodded to him to express its thanks. Xie Lian couldn’t help but find its haughtiness funny, but he held back his mirth.

“Did you see Hua Cheng?” Xie Lian asked.

Divine statues can make simple sounds but cannot speak, except for representations of the silver-tongued gods who govern speech-related arts. When the God-Pleasing Crown Prince heard his question, slight confusion colored its face, as if it didn’t know who he was talking about. Xie Lian understood immediately—he hadn’t met Hua Cheng yet at the period in his life depicted by the statue.

Xie Lian reworded his question. “Have you seen a man dressed in red?”

Only then did the divine statue produce a full smile, accompanied by an aloof nod.

“Do you know where he went?” Xie Lian asked.

After all, he wasn’t familiar with this massive cavern and was afraid of getting lost.

The statue thought for a moment before pointing him in the right direction.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Xie Lian said.

After walking along a stretch of road for a bit, he looked back. The God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue had mastered the essentials of walking quite quickly, and it had started performing a sword dance right there in the road. Its form was divinely graceful, as though it were center stage at the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, dancing above a captivated crowd. Too bad there was no audience to appreciate its efforts.

Not long after, Xie Lian hit another fork in the road. Without pausing, he entered the nearest cavern, ready to ask for help from another one of his statues.

When he entered, he saw a figure sitting on the stone altar hugging a liquor jug and vigorously chugging its contents.

Xie Lian was speechless for a moment, then he dashed forward to snatch the jug away.

“Stop!” he exclaimed.

This divine statue was also made in his likeness, except with a thinner face and plain white robes, no longer extravagant. After Xie Lian took away the liquor jug, the statue tried to snatch it back, but its strength in its dazed state was no match for his own. Its attempts sent it spinning in circles, and then, suddenly, it clung to Xie Lian and began to cry in frustration.

Xie Lian gaped.

"There's no need for you to cry either…"

The statue sobbed even harder at this; it cried like a man with infinite problems. It stopped grabbing for the liquor and instead clutched Xie Lian and refused to let go.

Xie Lian had no idea he was so clingy when he got drunk. He had no choice but to hug it and gently rub its back.

"All right, all right…" he soothed.

On second glance, Xie Lian realized that the "liquor jug" in his hand didn't have any alcohol in it, so it didn't matter if he returned it.

He asked, "Have you seen a man dressed in red? Where did he go?"

The divine statue pointed him in the right direction, and Xie Lian returned the liquor jug. As he continued on his way, the statue stopped crying. It sat back on the ground, hugging the jug, and drifted into dreamy distraction.

Xie Lian looked back and let out a sigh, then moved on.

After walking for a while longer, he heard a sound like the creaking friction of metal chains. He soon came upon a spacious cavern.

A swing hung from the domed ceiling of the cave, and a divine statue was seated upon it. It was sprightly and filled with the air of youth, and it wore the cultivation uniform of a Royal Cultivation Hall disciple—this was probably him at sixteen or seventeen. It was gripping the swing's chains and pulling on them hard to make it rock back and forth, but it kept failing because it was sitting on it. It wore a troubled expression, clearly upset by its plight.

At the sight of this, Xie Lian went over to give it a push or two. The swing finally began to move, which made the statue in cultivation robes happy.

Xie Lian took this chance to ask, "Have you seen a man dressed in red? Where did he go?"

The statue in cultivation robes pointed in one direction, his other hand still holding the swing's chain.

Xie Lian gave it another few pushes before he said, "Goodbye, then."

The swing rocked back and forth dozens of times but eventually came to a stop once more. Without anyone to push him, the statue in cultivation robes sat there in a daze, and the troubled expression resurfaced on its face.

I should reach him soon, right? Xie Lian thought as he walked on and on.

Just then, he heard a small voice that sounded like it was suppressing pain. Confused, he wondered aloud, “What’s that sound? Gasping…?”

The voice was coming from a cavern just ahead. When Xie Lian went in, he saw a stone altar with what appeared to be a divine statue lying on top. A sheer white cloth covered it from head to toe and draped down the altar to brush the ground. The figure beneath the silk was writhing in shadowed contour, at times curling into a ball, at times tossing and turning. It looked like someone struggling painfully and suffering grave torment.

Speechless, Xie Lian was just about to go over and pull off the white sheet when a hand reached out from behind him and covered his eyes.

“Gege,” sighed a low voice, also from behind him.

Xie Lian chuckled. “San Lang, do you think I don’t know what this is even if you don’t let me see it?” he asked gently.

After a long silence, another sigh escaped Hua Cheng. “Gege, I was wrong.”

Xie Lian pulled down his hand and looked back to face him. “The Land of the Tenders?”

The one standing behind him was a tall man dressed in red. It was, of course, Hua Cheng.

Now that he had been caught, he raised one hand to hold his troubled brow. “…Yes,” he finally admitted.

No wonder. If that's what it was, it was no surprise that Hua Cheng wouldn't let him look at the statue.

“You came here tonight hoping to hide *this* statue, didn’t you?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng’s gaze shifted elsewhere as he answered. “Yes.”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Was Hua Cheng really so afraid of letting him see it?

“Why hide it?” he asked. “It’s not that big a deal, really. But now we have a troublesome problem on our hands…”

The troublesome problem being that Xie Lian’s arrival had unintentionally animated all the divine statues.

It wasn’t really too much of a concern, but to this statue in particular, it was an agonizing affair—for the sculpted idol beneath the silk cover was a depiction of the seventeen-year-old Xie Lian who had been poisoned by the Land of the Tenders inside that cave out in the wilderness.

The other divine statues depicted sword-dancing, or drinking, or swinging on a swing—all of that and more. This one, however, was the unfortunate representative of the time Xie Lian had been laid low by that dreadful flower yao’s poison, so when it came alive, it had to suffer the grave torment of the poison of desire.

The agonized gasping from under the sheer cloth was unbearable to hear—it forced Xie Lian’s mind back to that harrowing, torrid night.

“It’s awful, what it’s going through right now,” Xie Lian said. “If I leave, will it return to being a simple stone statue?”

If it did, it wouldn’t need to suffer further torture.

“I’m afraid not,” Hua Cheng replied. “Gege, you’re in pretty much your most powerful state right now. Every divine statue in the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods has been affected by you, and they will remain animated for a long time even if you leave.”

It wouldn’t be right to simply abandon this statue to its pain. “Then… is there any other way?” Xie Lian asked.

Indeed, Hua Cheng was a man of ways. With a slight nod, he said, “I was just attending to this matter. Come with me, gege.”

He led Xie Lian to a different stone cavern, and Xie Lian’s eyes widened when they entered the room. Inside stood a stone sculpture of a man—tall and slender, with a handsome face and lips that curled slightly upward. An eyepatch covered its right eye.

This statue was an almost exact replica of the red-clad man who'd led him here. It was a ghost king statue!

"This is…" Xie Lian trailed off.

"Something I carved in a hurry when I realized things were going wrong," Hua Cheng explained. "I haven't sculpted in years, so I'm a little rusty. Gege, look. Does it look like me?"

After examining it in detail, Xie Lian declared, "Very much so! But…"

"But…what?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian grinned. "It doesn't look quite as good as the original."

Hua Cheng smiled as well, then Xie Lian returned to the subject.

"So, San Lang, the idea you mentioned is…?"

Was it to have this ghost king statue help…"detoxify" the divine statue poisoned by the Land of the Tenders?

After a brief silence, Hua Cheng's smile disappeared and his expression went serious. Looking Xie Lian in the eyes, he stated, "Yes."

Xie Lian hadn't yet noticed the caution in his expression and thought, *This idea is much too…*

Although it certainly was an effective way to get to the root of the problem, just the thought of it was absurd and ridiculously debauched. To put it bluntly—were they really planning on suppressing the poison of desire by using the ghost king statue to take the virginity of his young divine statue?

Honestly, it was hard to even talk about!

Xie Lian was still at a loss for how to respond when Hua Cheng suddenly bent down on one knee in front of him. Taken aback, he quickly moved to pull him up.

"San Lang? What are you doing?"

"Your Highness, I have been disrespectful," Hua Cheng said in a grave voice.

Xie Lian couldn't get him to stand, so he crouched down as well. "How were you disrespectful?" he asked, puzzled.

Hua Cheng only stared at him. After a few moments, he drew in a soft breath and said in the same grave voice, "Please believe me, Your Highness. I only conceived of this ill plan because I could think of no other solution. I take full responsibility for sculpting that divine statue, but I have never meant any disrespect or acted with the intent to profane Your Highness's likeness. If Your Highness feels this method is inappropriate, I will seek another solution."

At last, Xie Lian finally understood why Hua Cheng was acting so solemn.

He'd secretly carved so many divine statues of Xie Lian, and it must have always worried him that Xie Lian found his motivations strange and his behavior offensive. And now, considering his proposed plan, he was probably terrified Xie Lian would think that his mind was filled with nothing but obscene fantasies and disrespect.

A smile crossed Xie Lian's face, and he let out a sigh. He grabbed Hua Cheng with both hands and finally hoisted him to his feet.

"Of course I believe you. I know you've always respected me," Xie Lian said.

However, Hua Cheng's insistence that he'd never acted with the intent to profane was harder to believe. After all, ever since Hua Cheng had returned after dissipating into silver butterflies, the man was adamant about profaning his god almost every other day—and he was only growing bolder as time went on.

Xie Lian cleared his throat quietly. "This idea…there's nothing wrong with it. It's very good. Excellent."

When he thought more about what the method entailed, his face grew hot—his words felt very immodest. But now that he'd received Xie Lian's permission, Hua Cheng slowly regained his usual ease.

Xie Lian placed a hand on the ghost king statue's shoulder. "Shall I give it my blessing?"

Hua Cheng blinked, and a smile slowly emerged on his face. “If gege wants to. That’s more than I could ask for.”

Xie Lian nodded. Soon after, the statue lightly arched an eyebrow.

As he withdrew his hand, Xie Lian couldn’t help but smile at the sight. “Now it really resembles you!”

Several figures had slowly approached the cavern—many of the divine statues had sensed something and come over out of curiosity, wanting to get a closer look at this new divine statue that was so different from them.

The ghost king statue also noticed them. It blinked, and its single arched brow arched higher. It seemed like it had some new idea and was searching for something.

It took some effort for Xie Lian to push his own statues out the door, coaxing and shooing them away. When he swept a glance back, he suddenly asked, “Where’s the Land of the Tenders?”

He was already using that name for the unlucky divine statue. Now, upon the stone altar, there was nothing but a sheer white sheet—before anyone could notice, the reclining Land of the Tenders divine statue had vanished without a trace!

Oh no! Xie Lian thought. Hua Cheng, who had followed him over with his hands clasped behind him, frowned.

“Let’s hurry and find it! The Cave of Ten Thousand Gods is massive; it shouldn’t be able to escape very quickly,” Xie Lian said.

“I’m afraid that’s not so,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, look.”

He pointed at the ground, and Xie Lian had to go around to see the circle array that had been carved into the rocky surface by a powerful finger.

The teleportation array! It had somehow been able to draw a teleportation array with its bare hands—how much spiritual power had that divine statue drained from him?! Xie Lian was going to collapse on the spot.

That divine statue had been poisoned by the Land of the Tenders, you know! What if it escaped and offended passing mortal women? What sort of strange, lurid legends about him would spring from that?!

“When did it escape?” he asked. “Where would it go?”

“Don’t panic, gege,” Hua Cheng said. “Think. Back then, if you had been poisoned by the Land of the Tenders, who would you go to first?”

That actually wasn’t too hard to guess. Xie Lian wasn’t all that anxious in the first place, so he swiftly calmed down. “It would’ve been—”

An incoming line of spiritual communication interrupted him before he could finish. Caught off guard, Xie Lian raised his hand without thinking to answer the call.

Feng Xin’s voice immediately blasted in Xie Lian’s ears. “Your Highness! Holy shit, I just saw a monster that’s impersonating you!”

Just as Xie Lian expected! Back then, Xie Lian’s most trusted aides were Feng Xin and Mu Qing. They would’ve naturally been the first ones he’d seek if something like the poisoning incident happened!

Thank goodness the divine statue had gone to Feng Xin first instead of running through the streets. Xie Lian sighed in relief and quickly started to explain.

“No, no! That wasn’t a monster, and it wasn’t impersonating me either.”

Feng Xin was stunned. “What do you mean?! It’s not a monster or an impostor? What, it was really you?! That can’t be!”

“That’s not it either!” Xie Lian cried. “Anyway, how is it right now? Did you catch it? Don’t let it get away!”

“Too late,” Feng Xin said. “It already took off!”

“What? Oh no!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“Yeah, ‘oh no’ is right. Running around naked—how outrageous! What if people saw?!” Feng Xin said.

“Wait, what?! Naked?! I’m not…I mean, *it’s* not wearing clothes?!”

“Pretty much!” Feng Xin said. “It’s wearing *something*, but not much. The little clothing that’s there is all tattered, like someone ripped it up. If it’s not a monster or an impersonator, then what is it? What’s going on? It looked like a divine statue—wait. A divine statue?!”

He was suddenly horrified.

"It didn't escape from that place under the Kiln, did it? What were you two doing?!"

Xie Lian couldn't really remember how much he'd been wearing when he was suffering from the poison of the Land of the Tenders. He had been in a horribly uncomfortable state at the time, so maybe he'd stripped everything off in his delirium.

"I'll explain later!" Xie Lian cried. "I'll be there soon!"

He broke off communication and turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, we need to make a trip up to the New Heavenly Capital!"

Next to him, Hua Cheng had already collected the newly sculpted ghost king statue and transformed it into a tiny little idol, small enough to be carried in one's palm.

"All right!"

With a few strokes, he drew an array, and the pair made their way directly to the New Heavenly Capital in no time. They made a beeline for the Palace of Nan Yang and saw Feng Xin as soon as they opened the door. When he came face-to-face with Hua Cheng, his eyes bugged out.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower?" Feng Xin exclaimed in disbelief. "How come you're here too? What are you doing up here?! Outrageous—a Supreme Ghost King strolling into the Heavenly Capital whenever he wants instead of staying in his proper domain!"

Hua Cheng ignored him. He listened intently for a moment before asking, "Where's the announcement? The Upper Court couldn't possibly be going back on its word now, could it?"

Feng Xin knew exactly what Hua Cheng meant by "announcement"—in light of his service in saving the Heavens and Earth, the Upper Court had been forced to proclaim and exalt Crimson Rain Sought Flower's heroic deeds for an entire year. The veins on his forehead bulged violently.

"What announcement?! It's the middle of the night!" Feng Xin exclaimed angrily. "People need to rest too, you know. The announcement only happens during the day!"

Hua Cheng gave a noncommittal “oh” that probably meant he wouldn’t pursue the matter further.

“Gosh, whatever!” Xie Lian said. “Let’s get to the point. Where’s the ‘me’ you saw? Where did it go?”

“It ran that way,” Feng Xin replied, pointing in a direction. “I was just about to give chase when the two of you ran in here!”

Xie Lian suddenly had a bad feeling about this. “Question. That direction couldn’t possibly be—”

Feng Xin answered simply. “Toward the Palace of Xuan Zhen.”

“…”

“Let’s go!” Hua Cheng said in a dark voice.

The two didn’t dare delay. They made a beeline for the Palace of Xuan Zhen, then broke through the front doors and charged inside.
Mu Qing was sitting atop the divine altar, stunned, like he’d just seen something unbelievable.

Xie Lian went up to him and waved in front of his face. “Mu Qing?”

Mu Qing finally came back to his senses when he saw Xie Lian. Nevertheless, his expression remained shocked. It took some time before he could manage to demand, “Xie Lian, what were you doing?”

“What was I doing…?” Xie Lian repeated. “I…I don’t know. Can you please tell me?”

Mu Qing glared at him. “Why did you barge into my palace in the middle of the night in a state of undress?!”

Hua Cheng narrowed his eye, but Xie Lian only exclaimed, “…Don’t phrase it so misleadingly! No matter what you saw, it definitely wasn’t me!”

Mu Qing put this hand over his face, looking like he wanted to gouge whatever he had seen out of his eyes. “Even if it wasn’t you, it’s got something to do with you!” he rebuked with a steely expression. “It’s *that* divine statue from the cave, isn’t it? What are you two playing at, letting an indecent divine statue loose and allowing it to run amok in the middle of the night? Do you and Crimson Rain Sought Flower really need to play like *that*?!”

Hua Cheng scoffed. “What’s it to you?”

“What’s it to me?! It’s *my* palace!” Mu Qing cried angrily.

“Well, I played a part in rebuilding the Heavenly Capital,” Hua Cheng retorted leisurely.

“…” Mu Qing was speechless.

It was true. The Upper Court had suffered catastrophic damage, and plenty of heavenly officials had to secretly ask for help from the master of Ghost City. Hua Cheng made quite a significant contribution to rebuild the New Heavenly Capital, and that was a fact.

“We weren’t playing; it was an accident,” Xie Lian explained. “Where is it now?”

“It stole a sword from me and ran off to—” Mu Qing began, but Xie Lian knew where to go without him needing to say more.

Clanking metal rang out from one of the Palace of Xuan Zhen’s outdoor gardens. The little ghost king idol Hua Cheng carried with him hopped down on its own and hurried toward the garden in leaps and bounds.

Xie Lian rushed to the garden, and sure enough, the Land of the Tenders statue was standing atop the rockery!

The divine statue’s tousled clothing revealed large swaths of its smooth shoulders and chest. The clothing below the belt barely covered the essentials, making for an incredibly suggestive sight. The expression on the sculpture’s face was also quite a feat of mastery—its brows were tightly knit, and one could almost see the sheen of sweat and blush on its skin. It wouldn’t be a lie to say it had been wrought by the devil’s hands. It was using the sword it had stolen from the Palace of Xuan Zhen to stab itself with arduous effort, which was causing the loud clanking noises. It was trying to detoxify itself in the same way Xie Lian had attempted back then.

However, the Kiln stone from which it was wrought was formidable, so the sword couldn’t penetrate no matter how hard the statue tried. The blade eventually bent with its efforts.

As if it had lost all hope, the statue raised its hand—it was going to smash its own head to pieces.

"Calm down! Calm yourself!" Xie Lian hurriedly called to it.

The divine statue turned its confused, hazy eyes toward him, and Xie Lian leapt up to deliver a slap of his own. The statue tumbled inside a hollow cavity of the rockery structure and lay immobile, unable to get up. Hua Cheng darted to Xie Lian's side and threw something down.

It was the ghost king statue!

Or, rather than being thrown, it had actually struggled free of Hua Cheng's clutches as soon as it saw the statue of the young god. Once free of his grip, the ghost king statue transformed back into its tall, slender full-sized form as it sailed through the air, then it dropped to land atop the divine statue.

A surprised gasp came from below, and Xie Lian promptly jumped off the rockery.

"It's too late! Sorry, we're gonna borrow your sacred garden for a bit!" Xie Lian exclaimed as he pushed Mu Qing, who had rushed over at the sound of the commotion, back into the palace hall.

Mu Qing was shaken. "What were you guys doing?"

"I'll explain some other time. Very sorry!" Xie Lian said.

"What's there to apologize for?" Hua Cheng asked, slowly and leisurely. "You've saved this guy's life how many times now?"

"No, you'd better lay it all out clearly, right now," Mu Qing demanded. "I saw *you* throw another you down there. *He* threw another him down too, right? My eyes didn't deceive me? So what are you two up to? What's happening inside that rockery right now?"

Xie Lian was almost strangling Mu Qing in his attempts to drag him back inside the palace hall. "This is urgent! Really, Mu Qing, don't go over there! Why must you push this?!"

"Xie Lian!" Mu Qing roared. "What are you two doing in my palace?! What the fuck?! What the actual fuck?!"

“It’s not *us*!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “It was only an accident. It’s really too late…and you’ve caught Feng Xin’s language again!”

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Two hours later, the two statues finally exhausted all the spiritual power they had taken from Xie Lian and Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian put his hand over his face the moment he went inside the rockery for a look. While Hua Cheng took care of the statues, Xie Lian went out wordlessly to stop Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who both wanted to see for themselves.

“You two don’t want to see it,” he said with the utmost sincerity.

Feng Xin wasn’t a curious person, so he wisely retreated the instant he got a bad feeling. Mu Qing, however, couldn’t let it go. He flung his sleeves wildly and mumbled equally crazily, his face as dark as a pan’s bottom.

“I can’t believe this…I can*not* believe this! Not only that a thing like this could happen in the first place—it just had to happen in *my* palace!”

And then, he drifted away like a ghost. He would probably never be able to look at that rockery the same way again. Xie Lian highly suspected that he would chop it to bits with his bare hands after they left.

To be honest, Xie Lian himself couldn’t believe that he’d been the cause of such a funny, *mortifying* accident—he honestly didn’t know whether or not he should feel embarrassed about all this.

He turned his head to look at the two statues—no, they should now be called one statue—and asked, “Will they…stay like that?”

“Yeah, let them,” Hua Cheng said. “It’s not like they can be separated now.”

Xie Lian covered his face.

What heavenly official had statues in a pose like that?! It’d be a disaster if anyone saw! It was too indecent—and absolutely outrageous!

Xie Lian groaned. "…San Lang, make sure they're…properly hidden. Don't let anyone see them."

"But of course," Hua Cheng replied with a laugh. "Don't worry, gege."

They brought the two-as-one statue back to the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods, and Xie Lian wiped the sweat from his face once it was finally returned to its place. The other Xie Lian statues inside the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods once again surrounded them, curious, but they were once again coaxed and pushed away by the real Xie Lian.

"Turn your eyes away from impropriety; don't look."

The statues had no choice but to leave. Although they didn't get to see that divine statue's new and final state, they all kept glancing back as they walked away, seeming very jealous that the Land of the Tenders Xie Lian finally got a "companion."

The Land of the Tenders' poison had certainly been neutralized, but all the other statues still seemed to be missing out on fulfillment of their own. There was no one to admire the God-Pleasing Crown Prince, no one to lend a hand to the drunk, no one to push the swing…

Xie Lian couldn't help but think greedily, *If only every Xie Lian could have a Hua Cheng.*

Unexpectedly, Hua Cheng said the same thing aloud. "Doesn't gege think it would be better if every His Highness had a San Lang by his side?"

The two clapped their hands together and immediately set to work, and a great manifestation of their abilities began to unfold within the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods.

Soon, Xie Lian had witnessed the entire process of how Hua Cheng transformed a large, heavy rock into an exquisite, expressive stone statue that seemed almost alive. It was impossible to describe his technique, since Hua Cheng moved so fast that Xie Lian couldn't even see how it was done. He assumed that Hua Cheng had long since merged his sculpting techniques with his spiritual ones, so all that remained for Xie Lian to do was watch in amazement.

In any case, in the space of only a moment, Hua Cheng turned around and picked up a newly sculpted kid from a pile of debris. The boy had disheveled hair, ragged clothes, and bandages wound around his head. He looked sad and pitiful, and he clutched something in his hands that he refused to let go of. Xie Lian placed one hand on the little one's head and gave it his blessings while Hua Cheng gave it a bit of spiritual power. Shortly after, it blinked and started looking around. When it found that someone was dangling it in the air by its collar, it lashed out with a brutal kick.

Hua Cheng dodged easily, like he'd already anticipated the attack, and let it struggle and kick in his grip however it wanted.

Xie Lian hadn't expected the little Hua Cheng to be so aggressive and couldn't help but chuckle. "Oh my, so fierce!"

Hua Cheng clicked his tongue and tossed it away. The little one fell to the ground with a *thud*, but it quickly crawled back to its feet and glared at Hua Cheng with its eye flashing.

Xie Lian extended a hand to it, worried that it might've fallen too hard. "San Lang, you're too rough! Careful not to break it," he chided.

In a way, this little one had just been born!

"No matter," Hua Cheng said nonchalantly. "He's plenty resilient."

The kid was vicious as hell toward Hua Cheng but quite friendly toward Xie Lian. Xie Lian beckoned for him to come closer, and he moved to do that—but just then, the God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue sensed something and descended from his position, gazing their way.

The moment he saw the God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue, the little one was stunned, frozen in place. His unbandaged eye widened, and he hurried over with thumping steps. He clearly wanted to grab the hem of the Crown Prince's clothing and pounce on him, but at the same time, he didn't dare get too close lest he dirty his robes. It was a long time before he extended his arms very carefully and opened his stubborn little fists.

There was a single tiny flower hidden in his hands.

The God-Pleasing Crown Prince gave the boy a small smile as he accepted the flower. Then he reached one hand out and picked the boy up, hoisting him up into his arms. The two left happily, just like that. One had finally found someone to admire his sword dance, and one had finally found someone to offer his flower.

Xie Lian felt relieved as he watched them, but a problem suddenly occurred to him. “San Lang, after you’re done sculpting everything, the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods will be filled with so many of our divine statues. Will they begin to mistake who belongs with who? So many of them look alike, after all.”

“They won’t,” Hua Cheng replied with a broad smile.

“Why not?”

“They won’t,” Hua Cheng repeated with confidence.

He raised his eyes to gaze at Xie Lian, still smiling.

“Even if ‘Your Highness’ mistakes me, ‘I’ would never mistake Your Highness—because a Hua Cheng will only ever be the believer of a single Highness; he is faithful to his one and only. It will never happen.”

Xie Lian met his gaze with equal intensity. “I would never mistake you either,” he blurted. “There will only ever be a single most devoted believer for a Xie Lian. ‘I’ will always remember that. I…”

He trailed off, suddenly rather embarrassed by his declaration. The two of them were like children eagerly promising each other, *“You’ll always be the only one I like the very best.”* While it was sincere, it was incredibly juvenile.

And while juvenile, it was incredibly sincere.

After a brief silence, Xie Lian cleared his throat softly. “So then… next, let’s help the Royal Highness on the swing by sculpting a Lord Ghost King to push him.”

It looked so very lonely and sad without anyone to help push.

“Sure,” Hua Cheng replied happily.

“And then, what about the drunk one?” Xie Lian asked. “That one’s a little troublesome. It seems utterly confused, not to mention it cries. Gosh, there are too many divine statues here; I wonder how long it’ll take before all the ghost kings are carved?”

“Why worry?” Hua Cheng asked with a smile. “There’s no rush—they’ll all meet eventually.”

Xie Lian also smiled, then he nodded. “Mmm. They will all definitely meet,” he said softly.

Inside the stone cave, the two once-solitary statues were joined as one. Their gazes and bodies were entangled endlessly in their tight embrace, both staring with rapt adoration at the other face mere inches from their own.

They were truly forever inseparable.

Chapter 140:
Extra 5
The Ghost King's Birthday

A MAJOR EVENT was fast approaching.

This event had sent every ghost in Ghost City into a tizzy. Xie Lian was also shocked when he heard about it; soon he was just as antsy as the ghosts who had come to inform him in secret.

"Birthday?"

"That's right!"

That's right, indeed. The Lord of Ghost City, Hua Cheng, had a big birthday coming up—he was turning a ripe ol' who-knew-how-many years old!

This information completely blindsided Xie Lian, and an inexplicable panic seized him.

"Then…then, then, then, then how did San Lang celebrate in the past?"

The ghosts fought to answer, and their responses were all over the place.

"With a huge party, *quack*!"

"It's not really him doing the celebrating; we just fool around on our own, I guess…"

"But Chengzhu doesn't care about it at all, you know?"

When he heard this, Xie Lian asked, "What do you mean, he doesn't care at all?"

"His lordship never celebrates his birthday," a ghost answered.

"Yeah, he never cares what we do on the big day. He never spares a look at any of our presents either, *quack*. So every year, his birthday bash is just us having a swell time on our own, *quack*."

“The eminent have sparse memories—his lordship doesn’t seem to remember what day his birthday even is!”

Xie Lian thought for a moment, then made a firm decision. Since Hua Cheng had shown such little care for his previous birthdays, Xie Lian had to think of a way to make this one different—to make it notable and interesting, and to give him a perfectly happy day. Otherwise, wouldn’t it be a birthday just like all the rest, whether Xie Lian was with him or not?

First, a present was a must. Xie Lian fell into deep contemplation. What should he give?

The ghosts stared at him with hopeful eyes. “Xie-daozhang, are you thinking about what to give m’lord?” one asked.

“Yes,” said Xie Lian. “Much ashamed, I’m…not too confident I know what your Chengzhu likes. What if I give him something he doesn’t fancy…?”

“Please. What are you worried about?” the hog butcher assured. “As long as it’s from Granduncle…from Xie-daozhang, I’m positive Chengzhu will be beside himself with joy.”

“Yeah, he’d be happy even if you gave him a piece of scrap paper. Grand…Xie-daozhang’s present will always be different from anyone else’s!”

Xie Lian gave a dry chuckle in response. He considered that sort of thinking vain and frivolous; it wasn’t serious or sincere in the least.

“You can’t say that,” he said. “A present must be carefully chosen… Does anyone have any ideas?”

Hua Cheng had ruled over Ghost City for centuries, so perhaps the ghosts knew a bit more about the kinds of things he liked. Maybe there were some nascent ideas to be plucked from this group brainstorming session, and he’d be able to find a present that was both suitable and original if he used his head a little.

Sure enough, the crowd answered, “Yes, yes, yes!”

Dozens of chicken feet, pig trotters, and tentacles extended toward Xie Lian offering a mess of things, some of which even he’d never seen before. Amazed and surrounded, he picked an item at random—a small green jade bottle that was rather mysterious and elegant.

“Oh? What’s this?”

“The bestest love potion!” the offerer of the bottle said. “A few small drops, and the person being drugged is guaranteed to fall head over heels for the one doing the drugging! Their desire will be set ablaze—with no harm done to the body!”

After a pause, Xie Lian turned serious. “Thanks for the recommendation. However, love is born from the heart; how can it be manipulated by a potion? Don’t use things like this in the future, everyone,” he scolded.

“Yes, yes, you’re right; I won’t use it anymore,” the ghost who had offered the potion replied, fearful and reverent. “But we typically don’t really use it—I only suggested it because Xie-daozhang was asking what to give as a gift.”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that. Why did they think he would need to give Hua Cheng a love potion?

“I don’t imagine your Chengzhu would need a potion like this,” he chuckled.

The crowd pushed that ghost down and away in a flurry of hands and feet, exclaiming, “Yeah! Would Chengzhu need to use a potion if he desired somebody? Honestly!”

That certainly is the big, fat truth of the matter, Xie Lian thought. In his own case, not a single drop of potion was needed—he was under Hua Cheng’s spell at the mere sight of him. How very shameful.

To keep his embarrassment from surfacing on his face in a blush, he quickly picked up a box.

“And what’s in here? Pearls? Pills?” he asked as he opened it.

“It’s a child-bearing pill!” the ghost who had offered the treasure replied.

“…”

Speechless, Xie Lian immediately snapped the box shut. He didn’t even need to ask what *that* thing did.

“What the heck is all this stuff…?” he mumbled helplessly.

Why were they only giving him such unseemly suggestions for Hua Cheng’s present?

In any case, after that messy excuse of a discussion, Xie Lian knew that there were no useful suggestions to be gotten from them. He told the ghosts to prepare the ghost king’s birthday celebration in secret to give Hua Cheng a surprise, then left to think on his own.

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Perhaps the matter occupied so much of his mind that his grief was written on his face. He was racking his brain while keeping Hua Cheng company during his writing practice when the one beside him spoke.

“Gege.”

Xie Lian snapped out of it. “What is it?” he asked, tilting his head.

“Is it my imagination,” Hua Cheng began, putting down his brush and staring intently at him, “or are you worried about something, gege? Won’t you tell me and allow your San Lang to share your burdens and help solve the problem?”

Xie Lian tensed and neutralized his expression in an instant. “Do *not* put down your brush,” he warned. “Do not slack. Pick it back up. Continue.”

Hua Cheng laughed aloud and picked up his brush anew. “I got caught,” he lamented with a lazy sigh.

Seeing that he’d managed to muddle the matter for now, Xie Lian gave a mental sigh of his own in relief.

Yet Hua Cheng only wrote two more lines before he said, sounding casual, “But, gege, you certainly have been acting a little odd lately.”

Xie Lian tensed again. “Oh? How so?”

Hua Cheng studied him for a while before chuckling. “Gege seems a little more…*compliant* than usual.”

“Haven’t I always been like that?” Xie Lian replied with a smile.

But Xie Lian really was drawing a blank even after he’d thought long and hard, so he decided to take a risk. He blabbed about nothing in particular for a little while, then he asked with an attempt at nonchalance, “San Lang, I’ve got a question for you.”

“Hmm? What is it?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Do you ever feel that something is…lacking? Or something?” Xie Lian asked.

“Lacking?” Hua Cheng wondered. “What do you mean, gege? Do you lack something?”

“Oh, no…I meant you. I’m just asking…”

But Xie Lian didn’t dare to be too straightforward, lest Hua Cheng catch on. Instead of asking questions like *“What kinds of things do you like?”* or *“What sort of presents do you want?”* he knew he had to ask in a roundabout way, but he wasn’t sure if rounding about would supply the information he needed. What a terribly stressful business this was.

“Me?” Hua Cheng wondered. “Does gege think I lack anything?”

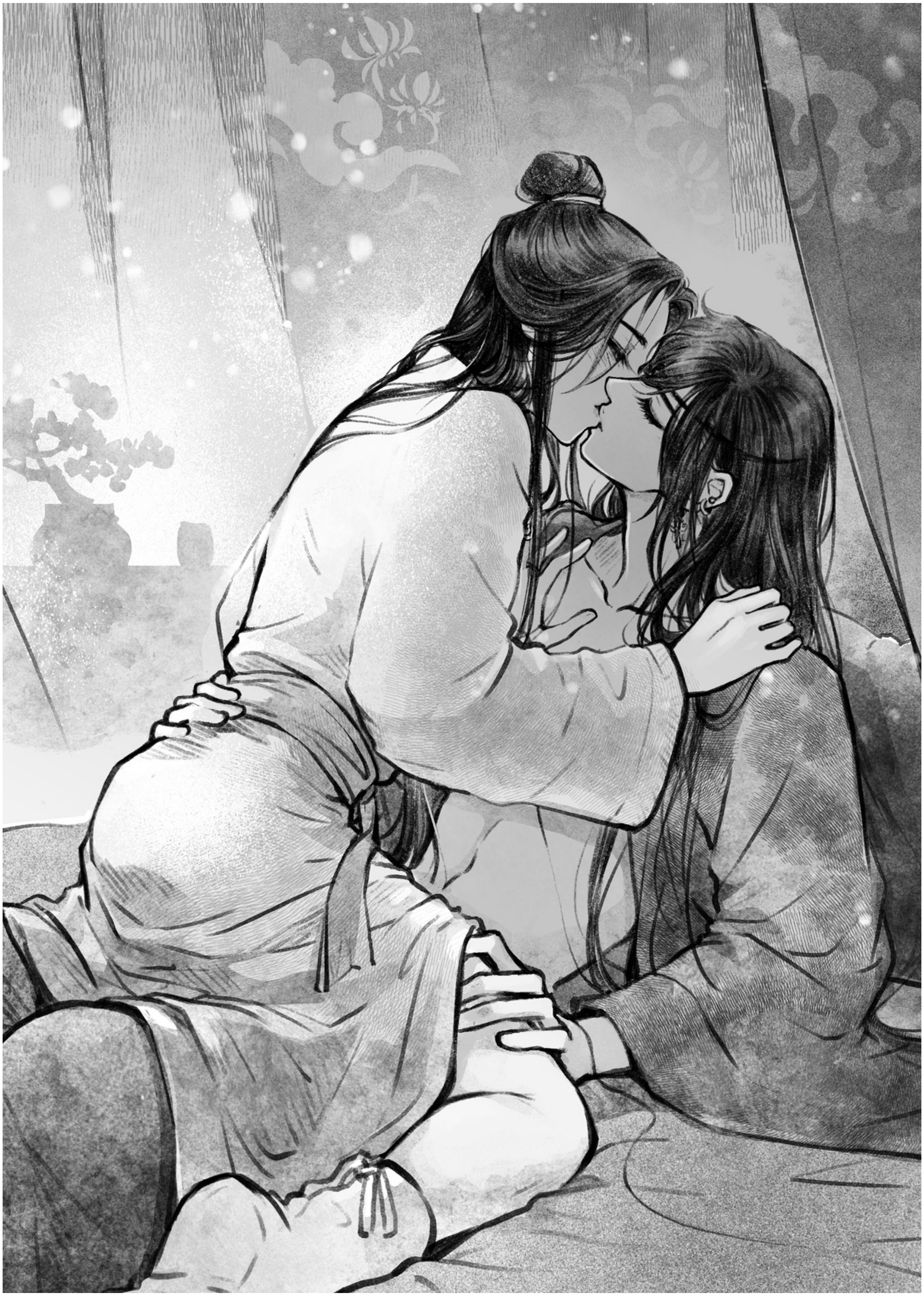
He truly didn’t. Xie Lian couldn’t help but deflate in embarrassment.

“Why do you ask, gege?”

Afraid he was about to catch on, Xie Lian took the extreme option and gave him a hard shove. Hua Cheng was never on guard against him, so he was knocked back against the bed with a *thud*.

Although his eye went wide in surprise, he clearly didn’t object to the treatment.

“Gege, what is this?” he asked, flashing a smile. “Such enthusiasm. You—”



Xie Lian boldly approached and sealed his words, preventing Hua Cheng from finishing that thought. Soon, Hua Cheng had lost all mind for further interrogation. He captured him in his arms, flipped their positions, and stopped caring about Xie Lian's odd behavior.

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Although Xie Lian racked his brain long and hard, he was still coming up empty, so he had no choice but to seek outside help. And the first ones he thought of were, of course, his two capable former subordinates.

The three of them crouched together in a remote, unknown, run-down temple.

After a period of awkward silence, Feng Xin asked, "What are you two looking at me for?"

The other two continued to stare at him, their silence speaking for them.

It couldn't be helped. Of the three of them, Feng Xin was the only one who'd ever had a wife, so he should technically be the one who knew best about how to delight one's beloved. But Feng Xin's face only grew darker the more they stared.

"…It won't be any use, no matter how long you two stare at me," he said. "I only ever gave her one thing."

And it was a golden belt—one that Xie Lian had given *him*.

Mu Qing couldn't believe he'd been dragged out to discuss something like this. The fact that he wasn't yet rolling his eyes was already very polite of him. All he wanted was to get this over with quickly.

"That works. Belts are nice. You might as well give him a golden one too."

Xie Lian automatically filtered out the sarcasm and replied, "But I don't have any more."

They had all been pawned centuries ago!

Going harder on the passive-aggression, Mu Qing said, “Everything’s smooth sailing for you now; the streets are filled with your temples and devotees. Just send any of those people a dream and tell them what you want. That’ll net you a golden belt, no problem.”

“But that’s meaningless,” Xie Lian said. “I’d hardly be putting my heart in it if I got my devotees to offer me a present that I want to give someone else.”

Seeing that his sarcasm hadn’t been registered, Mu Qing’s tone finally returned to normal. “Why are you being such a pain? Just make something yourself, then.”

“Good idea!” Xie Lian said quickly. “But I don’t know how.”

“You can learn.”

“You’re right. But from whom?”

Mu Qing was growing impatient. “How should I know? Just grab someone…”

Before he could finish his sentence, Mu Qing trailed off and realized that the stares were now on him.

Four hours later, all ten of Xie Lian’s fingers were covered with needle pricks and fully wrapped in bandages to keep his hands from streaming blood. His pain and effort had produced a long, striped object of indeterminate purpose.

Unable to stand the sight of the thing, Mu Qing demanded, “What *is* that?”

Xie Lian sighed. “A belt.”

“I know it’s a belt,” Mu Qing said gruffly. “What I’m asking is, what did you attempt to embroider on it? What are those two potatoes supposed to symbolize?”

“They aren’t potatoes!” Xie Lian protested. “They’re two people. Can’t you tell?”

To help Mu Qing better visualize it, he gestured as he explained. “These are their faces. These are the eyes. The mouths are here—”

After confirming that those were indeed the heads of two human beings, Mu Qing was floored. “Who embroiders two giant heads on a belt?! Can you even wear something like that in public? Your taste in fashion isn’t that terrible, so how did you manage to churn out something like *this*?”

Xie Lian couldn’t help it. He was adept when it came to things like fixing up a house, digging a well, building walls, and so on—he was good and fast at those tasks. But he was apparently born to be inept when it came to household crafts that women were partial to; the situation spiraled out of control the moment he picked up a needle or a spatula. He glanced at his hands, both now wrapped as thoroughly as zongzi. Although he didn’t feel pain, he couldn’t help being discouraged by the speed of his progress.

“…I’ll fix it, I guess.”

But the work was complete, so how could he fix it? The most he could do was add a circle of flower petals around the pair of little heads, thus transforming them into a canoodling pair of big, clumsy flower heads.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing grimaced harder, and veins bulged faintly on Mu Qing’s forehead.

“I taught a *pig* and it learned,” he scolded. “Why are you such a klutz? All you’re doing is stabbing your hands!”

Feng Xin spoke up. “When did you ever teach a pig? You’re all talk!”

“Forget it, you should just give up. You don’t have the talent for this,” Mu Qing said bluntly to Xie Lian.

It was rare that he got to tell Xie Lian that he didn’t have the talent for something, and with a total lack of humility, to boot. It felt kind of nice.

Feng Xin couldn’t listen to him anymore. “Can you cut the crap? You haven’t praised His Highness even once since we started. Wearing clothes and making them yourself aren’t the same thing! Besides, the belt isn’t that bad—at least it’s wearable.”

“All right, sure. Have him give you that thing, and if you dare wear it outside, you win.”

Before Feng Xin had a chance to respond, Xie Lian hurried to tuck away the belt that was so ugly it was funny.

“Oh no, let’s not. I’d better just keep this for myself!”

He couldn’t give anyone something like this!

***

Feng Xin and Mu Qing weren’t much help, so Xie Lian went to the next person who crossed his mind.

“A gift? Your Highness, you’ve come to the right person. There’s not a single rare treasure out there that the Wind Ma…that I’ve never laid eyes on!”

The two crouched on the side of the road. Enthusiasm ignited, the disheveled Shi Qingxuan gushed on and on. He was obviously an expert on this matter, and Xie Lian’s requests for advice grew even more humble.

“There definitely are precious treasures out there that haven’t been claimed, but you’ve got to put in an immense effort to get them,” Shi Qingxuan advised eagerly.

“That’s fine,” Xie Lian quickly assured him. “That suits me perfectly.”

More effort meant a more precious treasure—and wouldn’t that demonstrate his sincerity wonderfully? All the better if it was the treasure hardest to acquire in the whole world, one that no one had ever succeeded in obtaining. That way, it would make for an extraordinarily meaningful gift should he retrieve it for Hua Cheng. When he thought about how Hua Cheng would slightly arch one eyebrow and curl one corner of his lips upward, Xie Lian was seized by uncontrollable excitement—he couldn’t wait to jump into action.

Shi Qingxuan thought for a moment, then suggested, “The Starry Sky Flagon! You’ve heard of it before, right, Your Highness? That thing is a treasure, I tell you. Set it out under the night sky, and the fine wine in the flagon will reflect the sea of stars as it absorbs the essential spiritual energy of the heavens, the earth, the sun, and the moon. Not only is it a charming, elegant decorative piece, it’s also a great cultivation aid—”

However, as he listened, Xie Lian had a sinking feeling. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Qingxuan, are you talking about a small black jade flagon—about this big?” Xie Lian asked, gesturing a vague size. “With stardust encrusting the surface like fine gems?”

“Huh? How did Your Highness know? Have you seen it before?” Shi Qingxuan asked in amazement.

“…”

He hadn’t just *seen* it; last month, he *broke* it. He had wanted to pour himself some water and forgot he’d injured his arm, so his hand slipped.

At the time, Hua Cheng came over immediately to inquire about his injury. Xie Lian noticed that the flagon had been exceptionally unique and beautiful, so he asked Hua Cheng what to do about it and whether it could be repaired. However, Hua Cheng had simply assured him that it was okay—that it was nothing but a petty trinket. He didn’t spare it a single glance before calling for a subordinate to sweep up and toss out the pieces, then he whisked Xie Lian away to treat his arm.

Hearing Shi Qingxuan’s description, he had to think—could that shattered drinking vessel have been the rare Starry Sky Flagon?!

With a sinking heart, Xie Lian paused and said, “That one…might not be suitable. How about something different?”

“Oh.” Shi Qingxuan scratched his head, not quite understanding, but he racked his brain briefly and tried again. “Next one—the Eight Corners Brush! That brush is amazing, I tell you. The bristles were plucked from the tip of an ancient yao beast’s magic tail, and its shaft was wrought from a stalk that sprouted atop the head of a jade bamboo spirit. When not in use, it will grow—”

“Jade-green bamboo leaves?” Xie Lian cut in.

“Yeah! How did you know that, Your Highness? You’ve seen that one before too?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

How could Xie Lian not know it? That was the brush Hua Cheng used every day for writing practice, and he’d blame it when his writing came out ugly. He had chucked it to the floor time and time again, and sometimes it’d get kicked away to who knew where. After practice, Xie Lian often had to scour the room to find where the poor brush had gotten to, then pick it up, wipe it off, and put it away.

"…That might not be suitable either," Xie Lian said. "Do you have any other ideas?"

Shi Qingxuan rattled off seven or eight treasures, one after the other. Xie Lian discovered that all the things most people considered the world's rarest treasures sounded awfully familiar to him—and they were all in awfully tragic states. They were serving as Hua Cheng's footstools and throw rugs; he either played with them like toys or had already lost interest and tossed them away!

However, on reflection, Xie Lian considered that fairly logical. Was there a single rare treasure out there that Hua Cheng hadn't seen or couldn't get his hands on easily?

Thus, this line of thinking was another dead end, and the search for the ghost king's birthday present continued.

***

A drowning man will clutch at a straw; Xie Lian had asked pretty much everyone he knew, or at least everyone he had any hope of getting a decent answer from. Quan Yizhen only knew how to stuff gold bars into things, and Hua Cheng didn't lack for money. Pei Ming only knew how to give presents to women and couldn't come up with anything serious when asked what to give a man. As for Ling Wen…although she had escaped prison thanks to the many high-ranking heavenly officials who vouched for her—and because she was absolutely irreplaceable in the Upper Court—she was so thoroughly submerged in the sea of scrolls that had been thrown at her that she'd lost all sense. She knew nothing beyond working through reports at this point. Life in prison would've been much less stressful.

Without any workable ideas from anyone he'd asked, Xie Lian was out of options.

There were only two days until Hua Cheng's birthday. Xie Lian lay awake with his eyes wide open and thought about it for an entire night.

Finally, as he greeted the dawn with bloodshot eyes, he decided on what he would give.

With a clear goal in mind, he sat up quietly in bed, moving slowly. He glanced at Hua Cheng, who was sleeping soundly next to him.

Hua Cheng's hair was luminously black like raven feathers, and his long eyelashes were as dark as ink. When his eyes were shut tightly, it wasn't obvious that one of them was no longer there. His handsome features and the natural aggressiveness of his expression softened in sleep. Right now, he looked endlessly gentle.

Before Xie Lian could climb out of bed, he felt a sudden tightening around his waist, then a hand scooped him back.

"Gege, what are you doing up so early?" asked a lazy voice behind him.

Hua Cheng had woken up! His voice was low and a bit raspy, like he was still half-asleep.

Caught in the act and scooped back to bed, Xie Lian forced down his guilt and replied in a calm voice. "Oh, there's a prayer to be answered."

Hua Cheng shuffled closer and dropped a kiss by his ear. "The sky hasn't lightened yet," he said. "Who's gone to pray at a temple so early in the morning? Are they looking to die?"

Perhaps it was his guilty conscience, but Xie Lian's face was growing hotter and hotter as he listened to the voice at his ear.

"No, it didn't just come in. I've been letting it sit for a while now…"

He tried to get up again as he spoke, as it was honestly difficult to speak normally in that position, but Hua Cheng followed him upright. He circled his arms around Xie Lian's shoulders from behind and rested his head against the curve of his neck.

"Since you've been letting it sit, what does it matter if you let it keep sitting? Gege, you worked so hard last night. Why don't you rest a bit more?"

As Xie Lian struggled to fend off his clingy arms and alluring voice, he said with immense reluctance, "I…I've already let it sit for too long. I can't hold off on it any longer…"

“Oh,” Hua Cheng said. “Then shall I go with you?”

“No, it’s okay,” Xie Lian quickly declined. “It won’t take too long; I’ll be back very soon. You just rest!”

“Are you sure you don’t need me to come with you?” Hua Cheng confirmed.

“No!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “You can’t come. You absolutely mustn’t!”

Hua Cheng cracked his eye open a slit. “Why not?”

Xie Lian was stumped briefly, but then he whirled around and seized Hua Cheng by the shoulders. “You…must practice writing,” he commanded him sternly, looking him straight in the eye.

Hua Cheng looked at him with an innocent expression. He blinked.

“You must stay in the temple all day today to practice,” Xie Lian forced himself to say. “I’ll check your work when I return!”

As this order was issued, Hua Cheng’s expression only grew more innocent, and he tilted his head as he replied very obediently. “Okay.”

Now that the ghost king had been managed at last, Xie Lian scrambled away. Half reclining atop their altar bed, Hua Cheng smiled as he watched his fleeing back with a narrowed eye. He pillowed his arms behind his head and lay back down.

***

First, Xie Lian traveled out into the wilderness. After collecting the thing he’d set out for, he made for Mount Tonglu. He approached a small cottage in a forested area of the greater mountain range.

As soon as he walked inside, he saw that the state preceptor had set up a table and dragged three empty-shelled people around it to play cards. His face was set and serious, and Xie Lian immediately turned to leave without a word.

However, the state preceptor’s eyes flashed when he saw him. “Stop right there!” he barked.

Xie Lian knew there was only one circumstance in which the state preceptor would allow him to interrupt a game. Sure enough, the state preceptor flipped the table seconds later.

“Game’s over, something’s come up. Gotta go! Get back here, Your Highness! Why did you come seek me out?”

Xie Lian looked back and saw the three empty-shelled people flop to the ground. Clearly, the state preceptor had been on the verge of losing.

“It’s not actually anything important,” he lied.

“No, no,” said the state preceptor quickly. “Judging by your serious expression, it must be something major! The cards can wait. Let your master help you!”

“…”

After Xie Lian explained the reason for his visit, however, the state preceptor wore a different expression. As the two of them sat together on a long, crude bench, the only thing echoing through the air was the state preceptor’s scolding.

“You’re right, it *isn’t* anything important. A mere birthday! It’s not worth racking your brain over, running all over the place—and going to retrieve *that* thing personally!”

Xie Lian knew he couldn’t explain himself to others; they wouldn’t understand even if he tried. He rubbed his forehead so hard it began to turn red. “Either way, I’ve already collected the primary material,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve forgotten how to forge the Xianle style of longevity lock, like the one I wore when I was little. Master, will you please give me some pointers? There’s no need for you to do anything else; I’ll do all the work myself.”

“You don’t need to prepare any birthday presents,” the state preceptor said gruffly, like he still couldn’t get over the very idea. “You already delivered yourself to his doorstep; what more does he want?!”

“…”

Did he mean to say “You’re the best present of all”? Xie Lian really couldn’t stand that kind of argument—the concept itself bothered him. He slapped a hand over his forehead and thought, *I’m not that vain*.

Seeing him shake his head and wholeheartedly resist the idea, the state preceptor said, “And *you’re* being pathetic, honestly. You are the only heavenly official in history who has ever ascended thrice! You are the Flower-Crowned Martial God, the Crown Prince of Xianle! At seventeen, you had the audacity to tell the whole world that you were going to save the common people! At eighteen—”

“Master! Stop!” Xie Lian cut in. “Master! Enough! Don’t say any more!”

With such an embarrassing past, what was there to be proud of?!

The state preceptor watched him with a complicated expression. “Your Highness, you really don’t need to belittle yourself like this,” he said, exasperated.

“It’s not that I’m belittling myself, it’s just…”

It was just…when it came to the man he loved, it was natural to want to give him the best the world had to offer. But he also couldn’t help feeling that he wasn’t good enough for him.

The sight of Xie Lian right now made the state preceptor sigh. He crossed his hands and tucked them into his sleeves, thought for a while, and then said, “A longevity lock, hmm? Wait a moment and let me think. That was so long ago now; I can’t be sure that I remember every detail of how to craft it, or the blessing ritual.”

“That’s fine,” Xie Lian said. “If you can’t remember either, then I’ll piece it together from memory. I’m certain my sincerity will make up for the rest.”

After a short pause, the state preceptor glanced at Xie Lian and said, “Do you want to ask him?”

“…”

He didn’t say the name, but Xie Lian knew exactly whom he was speaking of.

Jun Wu was imprisoned deep in Mount Tonglu’s underground.

Xie Lian was silent for a long time, but in the end, he shook his head.

***

After spending another good half a day at Mount Tonglu, Xie Lian returned to Ghost City.

There were only a few hours left before Hua Cheng's birthday formally arrived. The ghosts and Xie Lian had agreed to pretend there was nothing afoot while sneakily decorating Ghost City in secret. Xie Lian dodged into a small shop, and it wasn't long before he was surrounded by ghosts.

Anxious and chaotic, they asked him, "Well? How'd it go?"

They were practically acting like thieves.

"How is your Chengzhu?" Xie Lian asked. "Has he noticed anything off?"

"Nope, nope," replied the ghosts. "Chengzhu stayed inside Thousand Lights Temple all day."

Xie Lian was slightly amazed. "The entire day?"

"Yeah! Chengzhu seems to be in a good mood. Grand…Xie-daozhang, did you prepare a birthday present?"

Reassured at last, Xie Lian smiled and touched the longevity lock he'd worked so hard to forge.

"Yes," he said.

The ghosts were elated. They spent some time discussing the setup for tomorrow's birthday celebration before Xie Lian finally returned to Thousand Lights Temple. Surprisingly, Hua Cheng was still practicing calligraphy when he walked in.

Hua Cheng actually doing his writing practice without Xie Lian's constant supervision was certainly a once-in-a-lifetime event; it seemed he truly was in a good mood. Xie Lian found it oddly funny to see that pitiful, precious Eight Corners Brush write such twisted, hideous words at the behest of Hua Cheng's hand, and he shook his head.

At the sound of Xie Lian's return, Hua Cheng put down the brush, giving it a break from his torture at last.

“Gege, you’re back?” Hua Cheng said with a smile. “Just in time. Come take a look at my results.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Okay.”

Just as he was about to approach, however, his face froze for a second and his steps faltered. He stopped, frowning.

Hua Cheng instantly noticed something was wrong and was at Xie Lian’s side in the space of a second. “What is it?”

Xie Lian’s expression swiftly returned to normal. “Nothing.”

It *wasn’t* nothing. He had felt a sharp, acute pang in his heart.

But Hua Cheng would not allow him to neglect his own health. “Where did you go today?” he asked as he caught Xie Lian’s wrist. “Did you get hurt again?”

“No,” Xie Lian said.

And that was the truth—he really hadn’t. Although he’d been running around for the past few days, everything had gone quite smoothly, and he hadn’t encountered any danger.

Hua Cheng hummed briefly. Unable to detect anything amiss, he dropped Xie Lian’s wrist. Xie Lian breathed deeply, in and out; he didn’t notice anything amiss either. Perhaps that pain had just been his imagination.

“Maybe I tweaked a nerve or something?” Xie Lian said with a laugh. “All right, let me see how you’ve done today.”

Only then did Hua Cheng smile once more. Catching Xie Lian’s hand, he said, “Come here.”

Xie Lian hadn’t responded before he felt another sudden stab of pain in his heart.

This time, it was definitely not his imagination! He felt it keenly. If the first time was a pinprick of pain, then the second was like his heart being raked by sharp nails. Fortunately, Hua Cheng had briefly turned his head away when it happened—Xie Lian might not have been able to blow it off as “nothing” otherwise.

The timing of this problem was inconvenient; Xie Lian didn't want to tell Hua Cheng and make him worry right now. They played around inside Thousand Lights Temple for a while before Xie Lian found an excuse to leave and examine himself more carefully.

A moment later, he dropped his arm, his expression solemn.

The conclusion was, of course, that there was no problem whatsoever. Otherwise, Hua Cheng would've caught it when he grabbed his wrist to check his pulse earlier.

So why was he experiencing random pangs of heartache?

Xie Lian pondered the matter for a moment and wondered if some evil spirit might have entered his body, or if perhaps he'd been poisoned by something strange. He didn't panic, though—at least not yet. It would be Hua Cheng's birthday very soon, and if something happened, he would surely have no mind to celebrate and would instead drag Xie Lian off for treatment again.

Xie Lian was used to bearing pain, and it wasn't like he hadn't experienced strange things like this before, so he didn't think anything of it. He decided to give it a day and deal with it on his own in secret later.

Night came, and the hour was fast approaching. Xie Lian went back to Thousand Lights Temple and found Hua Cheng still inside—blatantly bored out of his mind and making a show of doodling and wasting paper. Xie Lian began to smile at the sight despite himself. Before the smile could fully bloom on his face, however, there was another stab of pain in his heart.

When rubbing his chest didn't make it go away, he thought, *Looks like this is a little serious…but I can bear it for a while longer.*

He drew a soft breath and walked in. "San Lang? There's something I might need your help with," he said gently.

"What is it?" asked Hua Cheng as he put the brush down.

"Close your eye first," said Xie Lian.

Hua Cheng quirked his eyebrow, but he closed his eye as directed without question.

Xie Lian picked up his hands and said with a smile, "Follow me."

This was a reversal of that night on Mount Yujun. Hua Cheng smiled.

“Sure.”

“Watch the threshold,” cautioned Xie Lian as he slowly guided Hua Cheng to the door, hand in hand.

Hua Cheng had walked through Thousand Lights Temple countless times and didn’t need a reminder of how to walk where. Nonetheless, he waited until Xie Lian had given him the reminder before he lifted his boot, the silver chain on it jingling as he did so. They passed through the front gates and made their way down the long street that led away from the temple.

They had walked for a while before Xie Lian said, “Okay, now you can open your eye.”

Hua Cheng did as directed. In that instant, his ink-black eye brightened at once, like a lamp set alight.

Lanterns and colorful banners hung along the rambling main street. It was much tidier and fresher than the usual messy streetside; every household had made great efforts to clean up. New banners and signs replaced the tattered old ones, the walls and eaves were shiny and glistening—everything looked brand new.

The ghosts had them surrounded before they realized it, but all of them were holding their breaths and didn’t dare make a sound. The moment Hua Cheng opened his eye, they started blowing horns and drumming drums and hollering a messy chorus of “Happy birthday, Chengzhu!” Some also used the chance to yell “May you live a long time together,” and even “Have a child soon.” It was a horrid ruckus!

Xie Lian slapped a hand to his forehead at the sight of this awful presentation. They had spent a long time rehearsing and had managed—just barely—to cheer in chorus. So why was it now such anarchy?!

Hua Cheng was expressionless and apparently utterly unmoved by any of this. “What are you all doing? This racket is murderous,” he said, one brow arched.

The ghosts had abandoned their rehearsed presentation. With shockingly thick skin, they replied, “Then we die! It’s not like anyone here’s alive anyway!”

Hua Cheng snorted a laugh. When he turned around, he saw Xie Lian standing behind him, hiding his hands behind his back.

“San Lang,” Xie Lian began, “I heard…it’s your birthday today?”

Hua Cheng had clearly been waiting for this for a long time. He crossed his arms and tilted his head, replying with a grin. “Mm-hmm. Yeah.”

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly a few times, then suddenly hopped up and looped the longevity lock’s chain around his neck.

“This…was forged in a hurry,” Xie Lian said. “Hope you don’t mind!”

The longevity lock was engraved with patterns like the ones found on Hua Cheng’s vambraces: maple leaves, butterflies, beasts, and so on, all carved in exquisite detail. Furthermore, it contained potent spiritual power—this was clearly an extraordinary item.

The ghosts hollered, raising a fanfare.

“Sublime! It’s gorgeous! What is that treasure?!”

“Ah! Only Chengzhu is worthy of wearing such a treasure! Only such a treasure is worthy of being worn by Chengzhu!”

They were so over the top that Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He was growing ever more nervous, not knowing whether he should ask Hua Cheng what he thought of the gift. Hua Cheng didn’t say a word, but his eye shone brightly, and a touch of a smile was surfacing on his lips.

He picked up the silver lock that hung around his neck. However, just as he was about to speak, something unexpected happened.

Xie Lian’s knees suddenly buckled, and he dropped to the ground.

It was so sudden that the circle of cheering ghosts turned into a circle of alarmed cries. Hua Cheng’s smile faded immediately, and he caught him with a swift hand.

“Gege? What’s wrong?”

Though his face was pale, Xie Lian managed a smile. “Noth—”

The sentence died in his throat before it could even begin.

Oh no, there it is again!

The inexplicable heartache had struck again. This time, the pain was excruciating—like his heart was being blown to pieces.

Xie Lian groaned inwardly. He hadn't expected the onslaught of pain to be so aggressive. Each attack was more brutal than the previous—and it just *had* to strike now!

He was still rather calm, all things considered, but the agony went on and on—it felt like someone was hammering a peachwood[5] nail into his heart. Xie Lian was in so much pain that it was hard to breathe. He could barely lift his head, which was drenched in cold sweat.

Hua Cheng's expression had changed completely. "Your Highness?!" He caught Xie Lian's wrist, but he still couldn't detect anything wrong. "Your Highness! Where did you go yesterday?!"

Panicked cries sounded from all around. Although Xie Lian moved his lips, he couldn't utter a single word—it was like something had nailed his throat closed.

The arms that held Xie Lian were nearly shaking. A frenzy that bordered on madness colored Hua Cheng's handsome face, which had once always looked calm and unbothered. Another heavy pang struck Xie Lian's heart, and he finally passed out, unable to hold out any longer.

Before he lost consciousness, the word "sorry" filled his mind.

Today was Hua Cheng's birthday!

***

An unknown amount of time passed before Xie Lian jolted awake. He stared blankly at the ceiling above, not yet having caught his breath.

This is…Thousand Lights Temple? he thought dazedly. *What happened to me…? Did I fall asleep?*

He was still slowly coming back around when a hand suddenly caught and supported him.

Not inches away from him, he heard Hua Cheng's voice. "Your Highness?"

Xie Lian looked up, and sure enough, he saw Hua Cheng's expression was burning with pure, desperate concern. Xie Lian blinked and was just about to speak when another wave of excruciating pain struck his heart.

Now he was thoroughly awake. He hunched over instantly, his fingers nearly digging into the flesh of his chest—he exerted immense strength, like he was trying to claw out his own heart by force. Hua Cheng immediately seized his wrist.

"Your Highness!" he cried.

Had he not moved as fast as he did, five bloody holes would've bloomed on Xie Lian's chest right above his heart.

"This doesn't look right. Why don't you let go of him first?!" said a voice from the side—Mu Qing. He was here too, surprisingly.

"What if he hurts himself when I do?!" exclaimed Hua Cheng.

"I'll help you hold him down!" Feng Xin's voice chimed in. "If we don't figure out what's wrong quickly, the pain won't stop!"

Still hunched over, Xie Lian felt another hand seize his wrist. Hua Cheng seemed to falter at Feng Xin's words, and sure enough, he released him.

It was strange—the pain lessened significantly the moment he let go. At the very least, Xie Lian could move now. When he flipped onto his side, he noticed that Feng Xin and Mu Qing were standing at his bedside. They had probably been summoned here for questioning. As for Hua Cheng, he was standing nearby and watching him with an unblinking eye.

When Xie Lian saw him, the ache, which had finally subsided somewhat, made a comeback in full force.

Seeing his face change colors again, Mu Qing turned to Hua Cheng. "Stand further back! He starts hurting whenever you come close—whenever he sees you!"

Hua Cheng froze when he heard those words, and a terrible, almost indescribable expression crossed his face. Nonetheless, he darted away immediately, retreating outside the room—and when he disappeared from Xie Lian's line of sight, the agony in his heart abruptly ceased once more.

The ebb and flow of the pain was driving Xie Lian nearly mad. He panted a few times, then gritted out with difficulty, "What…in the world…is going on?"

Mu Qing and Feng Xin were holding him down firmly to prevent him squirming into a position where he could peek at Hua Cheng.

"'What's going on'? We should be asking *you* that! What's going on with *you*? You must've messed with something!" Mu Qing exclaimed.

"…Wouldn't I know if I had?" Xie Lian said. Besides, Hua Cheng had checked him over earlier.

"Then did you go anywhere strange over the past few days?" Mu Qing asked.

"The only places I went were to Mount Tonglu and…the State Preceptor's Tomb," Xie Lian replied.

Mu Qing furrowed his brow. "What? The State Preceptor's Tomb? Which State Preceptor's Tomb?"

Hua Cheng, who was standing outside the room, understood immediately. "State Preceptor Fangxin's Tomb?"

"San Lang, why don't you come in…?" Xie Lian beckoned.

"Gege, it's best for you to stay in there and recuperate. I'll take a look on your behalf," came Hua Cheng's low, grave voice from outside the room.

"I'll go too!" cried Xie Lian.

But the moment he rose, he crumpled back down in pain. There were no further sounds from Hua Cheng after that, so he had probably already left.

Xie Lian arduously attempted to rise again, and Mu Qing said, "You should stop moving around. You can barely walk at this point!"

Four hands pushed Xie Lian back down.

"It's not like I've never been in pain before," Xie Lian exclaimed, struggling all the while. "I'll get used to it."

He couldn’t stop seeing Hua Cheng because of this.

“*You’re* willing to be in pain, but your San Lang isn’t willing to allow that,” Mu Qing pointed out.

Xie Lian was taken aback. As he recalled Hua Cheng’s face when he fainted from the pain, and then Hua Cheng’s face when his expression scrunched in pain at his approach, Xie Lian’s breathing hitched. His face paled as another wave of torment tore violently at his heart.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both stared at him.

Dumbfounded, Feng Xin asked, “Didn’t Crimson Rain Sought Flower leave? Why is he still in pain?”

But Mu Qing was sharper and asked Xie Lian, “Were you just thinking about him again?”

Xie Lian clenched his teeth, and it was a long while before he could manage to say, “What…? Could I ever…not…think about him?”

“Stop it,” Mu Qing said. “Your fits are getting worse. The more you think about him, the more you suffer. Let me pour you a cup of water.”

Xie Lian didn’t even have the energy to shake his head and tell Mu Qing not to bother. When Mu Qing left, he closed his eyes and tried to recover a calm state of mind. However, the calmer he tried to be, the more worried he became. He had no idea what sort of evil thing had seized him, and neither he nor Hua Cheng had noticed anything wrong. He was afraid that Hua Cheng had gone out to search, alone and completely blind.

Mu Qing brought the teapot over. It was an exquisite snow-white piece that made Xie Lian recall how Hua Cheng had used it the night before. His face again went white, and he lay there, flat and unspeaking. At the sight of him, Mu Qing knew that his mind had flown off again.

Wearing a dark expression, he scolded, “Why does every little thing make you think of him? Do you want to die?!”

“It’s not like I can control it,” Xie Lian complained.

If one really could stop thinking about a person simply by declaring they would, then most of the mortal world’s trouble and suffering wouldn’t exist.

“Might as well knock him out, the way I see it,” Mu Qing said. “Save him from his own wandering mind.”

But as Xie Lian’s former servant, Feng Xin would never hit Xie Lian—and he would never allow anyone to hit Xie Lian in front of him either.

“No!” Feng Xin refused immediately. “I think you should talk to him more; distract him. That way, he won’t keep thinking about Crimson Rain Sought Flower.”

“What can I even say?” Mu Qing retorted. “He thinks of Crimson Rain Sought Flower regardless of whatever the actual topic might be. Knocking him out is the most straightforward option!”

“Well, you can’t hit him!” Feng Xin exclaimed. “How about this? He can’t possibly have the mind to think about anything else if we train idioms, right? I guarantee he won’t have the time. I’ll go first. Live as long as Nan Mountain!”

He absolutely hated this game and gritted his teeth as he started it with enormous effort. Mu Qing hated the game even more, but still he continued with the utmost reluctance, “…Mountain poor and water evil.”

Xie Lian had no other choice, so he weakly continued, “…Evil purple overtakes vermilion—” But before he could finish, he huddled into himself again.

Mu Qing was incredulous. “How did you manage to think of him because of *that*? There’s no thread of connection whatsoever!”

How is there no thread? Xie Lian thought. Vermilion, vermilion red, vermilion robes—red robes. How could he not think of Hua Cheng when he thought of red robes?

He couldn’t take the torment anymore. With fierce effort, he wrestled free of the two holding him down and rolled off the bed with a thud. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both knew how powerfully his strength could explode in an instant and had secretly conserved their own strength just in case, but they still couldn’t suppress him. They rushed to stop him when he struggled free but were both smacked to the ground.

Mu Qing raised his head, only to see Xie Lian run out the door. “Where are you going? Don’t run off!”

But Xie Lian was almost at his limit. He fished two exquisite dice from his sleeves and rolled them, stumbling as he threw himself at a door.

Hua Cheng had said that if Xie Lian wanted to see him, he would be able to, no matter what number he rolled. Xie Lian didn't know where the dice had taken him, but his door pounce and subsequent stumble sent him falling into someone's chest.

"Your Highness!" came Hua Cheng's dumbfounded voice from just above his head.

Xie Lian flung his arms around him frantically, afraid that Hua Cheng would disappear again. "San Lang! Don't go alone. We…together…"

Hua Cheng wanted to embrace him then and there, but his arms froze in midair and he forced himself to hold back.

"Your Highness, hurry back home," Hua Cheng chided, his voice grave. "You'll be in a lot of pain if you don't."

Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the Supreme Ghost King, feared by all denizens of the Three Realms, was at a loss for what to do in the face of Xie Lian's condition. He couldn't hold him, nor could he refuse to. An embrace caused pain, but pushing him away caused greater agony.

Xie Lian gritted his teeth and hugged him tighter. "Then *so be it*!" he cried with a trembling voice.

"Your Highness!" exclaimed Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian would rather die of pain while holding Hua Cheng close than die of pain while thinking of Hua Cheng all alone. The more it hurt, the harder he hugged.

Face covered with fine beads of sweat, Xie Lian said in a staggered, broken voice, "Wait for a moment, just a moment, I'll be all right in a minute. I'll get used to this in a minute. I'm very good at bearing pain. If you're by my side, I can stand it. If you're gone, then it'll…hurt unbearably…"

Hua Cheng stilled when he heard this, completely shocked. It was a minute before he said in a low voice, "Oh, Your Highness…"

His voice came out like a sigh, an agonized hiss—as if he was being tormented even worse than Xie Lian.

Xie Lian held him hard, waiting for the wave of pain to pass. While he tried to calm his breathing, he suddenly heard a voice from behind.

"Did you forge that by smelting your mask?"

Amid his dizziness and blurred vision, Xie Lian finally noticed that they were in a gloomy, desolate graveyard. It was a site known as the State Preceptor's Tomb, one that he had just visited days before. There was someone else here, standing behind them: a tall, strapping young man. It was Lang Qianqiu.

Xie Lian was already delirious when he made it here, so naturally he didn't notice the third person present. Now that he had, he didn't have the presence of mind to feel embarrassed.

Just then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing caught up with him. After getting smacked to the ground so hard he'd been unable to rise, Mu Qing was so furious that the veins bulging on his forehead might never disappear again.

"Why did you run off?!" he barked. "Two people and four hands can't even keep you down! And what the hell is this place? It looks like a graveyard or something!"

Feng Xin surveyed the area. "I think this *is* a graveyard. And one that's been dug up too. Is this the tomb of State Preceptor Fangxin? Why is His Highness Tai Hua here?"

"I heard there was suspicious activity at the State Preceptor's Tomb the day before yesterday, like a graverobber had visited," Lang Qianqiu replied in an ill temper. "I came to take a look."

And he wound up bumping into Hua Cheng and Xie Lian in the process. Something was on his mind, and he wasn't in the mood to offer pleasantries or give explanations.

"Did you forge that longevity lock using your silver mask?" he asked again, staring at Xie Lian. "Did you come back here the day before yesterday to take it?"

Xie Lian hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

When he took the position of state preceptor in the Kingdom of Yong'an, he wore a silver mask year-round. The mask was made of a rare type of metal—it was forged from half a catty[6] of silver yao. Aside from hiding one’s face, its much more extraordinary use was its ability to reflect magic and shield the wearer’s body and life. After State Preceptor Fangxin “died,” the mask was placed inside the same coffin as a burial effect.

A present must be something that the giver cherishes. After racking his brain, Xie Lian finally remembered that he had once possessed that unique treasure. It was incredibly useful and had helped him on multiple occasions; the mask was something he had hated to part with, as he hadn’t managed to bring it with him when he dug himself out of the coffin. Thus, he traveled through the night to the tomb of State Preceptor Fangxin, dug up his own grave, and unearthed the mask. He then melted it into liquid silver and reforged it as a longevity lock.

Everyone was wearing odd expressions. No one had ever visited the tomb of State Preceptor Fangxin to pay their respects—Xie Lian didn’t even bother to sweep his own grave when he came back, and the weeds had grown over a meter tall. He’d even desecrated it by digging it up… There was honestly no one else who could’ve done something like this!

The awkward silence lasted for a moment. When he saw Lang Qianqiu’s strange expression, Xie Lian finally spoke up and explained.

“That mask wasn’t taken from your family. It was refined from a silver yao that I once subdued…”

Had it been something that belonged to the royal clan of Yong’an, he never would have considered making Hua Cheng’s birthday present out of it. He also hadn’t known that Lang Qianqiu was still keeping an eye on the State Preceptor’s Tomb—he’d been under the impression that Lang Qianqiu had stopped caring after he buried him. Otherwise, he would’ve at least refilled the burial plot to keep Lang Qianqiu from being alerted and coming to check.

Lang Qianqiu was taken aback, then immediately got angry. “I wasn’t going to fuss about that!”

Hua Cheng shot him a chilling glare, and Lang Qianqiu’s expression hardened. Xie Lian, meanwhile, frowned as he looked at the silver lock, like something had occurred to him. His eyes met Lang Qianqiu’s, and he discovered that they had likely come to a similar conclusion.

Hua Cheng, of course, would not have missed this exchange. “Is there a problem with the longevity lock?” he asked. “Your Highness, have you figured it out?”

Xie Lian did have some idea what had happened, but he didn’t know how to say it. With a grim face, Lang Qianqiu spoke for him.

“The problem is *him*,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Hua Cheng demanded coldly.

“Qianqiu!” Xie Lian quickly cried.

Lang Qianqiu glanced at him but continued nonetheless. “After the Gilded Banquet, I was the one who brought him here.”

“Don’t say any more,” Xie Lian said.

Lang Qianqiu glanced at him again and shut up. He probably didn’t know how to explain what came afterward, but even though he didn’t continue, the others could piece it together themselves.

After the Gilded Banquet incident, the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu, seized State Preceptor Fangxin. In an act of revenge, Lang Qianqiu drove a thick wooden nail into his heart, sealed him in a coffin, and then buried the coffin in the wilderness and forbade anyone from mourning or paying their respects—not that anyone would’ve in the first place.

Xie Lian’s heart was pierced by the peachwood nail, and the blood that flowed from the wound dyed the silver mask in the coffin red. Thanks to its unique properties, the silver yao’s lingering qi absorbed the blood and maintained its vitality even after it left Xie Lian’s body.

When Xie Lian returned two days ago and dug up his own grave to retrieve the mask made from the silver yao and forge the longevity lock, he had roused the remnant blood on the mask, which took the opportunity to reenter his body.

No wonder they could find nothing amiss even when Xie Lian and Hua Cheng both examined his body repeatedly. It was because the thing causing the problem originated from him—his own blood! Of course there was nothing amiss about that.

Hua Cheng made to move, and although Xie Lian couldn’t see his face, he quickly held him back.

“San Lang!” he cried.

Lang Qianqiu had killed him for revenge, and Yong’an’s old king had certainly died at Xie Lian’s hand. Nailing Xie Lian into the coffin was an eye for an eye. As another wave of excruciating pain washed over him, Xie Lian gasped a few more times and groaned aloud despite himself.

Desperate concern blazed in Hua Cheng’s expression once more. “Your Highness?”

Lang Qianqiu hesitated briefly at the sight of Xie Lian’s face, which was as white as a sheet. “Do you…need my help?”

Xie Lian knew what Lang Qianqiu was like and what he might think. “No, it’s fine, Qianqiu, there’s no need,” he replied quickly. “This has nothing to do with you; it’s not your problem. I’m the one who wasn’t careful. You can leave it be.”

Mu Qing could see that Lang Qianqiu was in a very awkward position, being both a victim and a murderer. “That’s right, Your Highness Tai Hua. You can leave him to it. Go back.”

After a brief silence, Lang Qianqiu replied, “All right.”

Despite his answer, he still didn’t leave. The group didn’t have time for him, though, because Xie Lian was writhing in pain again—yet even so, he held on to Hua Cheng with a death grip and refused to let go.

“Let’s resolve this first!” Feng Xin cried. “Your Highness? What’s wrong?!”

Xie Lian was still thrashing, but he suddenly calmed when a crisp cracking noise rang out. Head drenched in cold sweat, he lay still and silent in Hua Cheng’s arms.

Hua Cheng returned his unyielding embrace in equal measure. “It’s done, Your Highness,” he said softly. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, right?”

It was only then that the group realized Hua Cheng was holding a handful of shimmering silver powder. As for the longevity lock that he had kept so precious and close to his heart—it was gone.

With the longevity lock destroyed, the wisp of blood in Xie Lian’s heart that had been tainted by the yao’s qi would slowly calm on its own.

Thus, Hua Cheng had gripped his gift in his fist and shattered it with a light squeeze.

Xie Lian's breathing slowed and calmed. As he turned his head, he saw the silver scattering and flowing from Hua Cheng's fingertips, then his eyes met Hua Cheng's. For some reason, he felt another tiny wave of heartache.

"Mmm…it doesn't hurt anymore," he mumbled.

***

With the curse broken at last, Xie Lian bade farewell to Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and Lang Qianqiu, then he slowly headed back toward Ghost City with Hua Cheng.

They walked side by side, and Xie Lian's face stayed hot the entire way—which was Feng Xin and Mu Qing's fault.

Before the group had gone their separate ways, Feng Xin couldn't resist asking as he wiped away his sweat, "So why did His Highness react like that at the sight of Crimson Rain Sought Flower? What was with that blood in his heart? Did it want to mess with him on purpose?"

Xie Lian already understood what had happened, and when he heard the question, he quickly replied, "Let's not look deeper into it!"

"Why not?" Feng Xin asked, confused. "What if it happens again? We need to get to the bottom of this, right?"

Mu Qing humphed. "You can't even figure *that* out? That blood was outside of his system for too many years; it needed to reacclimate after returning. Since it didn't have the chance to, of course it caused a stir. If his heart had been calm like still water, his mind as rippleless as an ancient well, it wouldn't have mattered. But…"

But with a restless heart, a single stirring thought would cause the blood to roil relentlessly. He would thus be stricken with unbearable agony and endlessly relive the pain of the peachwood nail piercing his heart.

When all had been revealed, Xie Lian didn't dare look at Hua Cheng. He was quite certain that he'd lost every ounce of dignity to his name, now and forever going forward—didn’t this mean he’d been rolling around in agony because every glance at Hua Cheng, every thought of him, made Xie Lian’s heart go wild?! Even as he considered that, it started racing once again.

Thankfully, it wouldn’t hurt anymore, no matter how fast it raced.

Hua Cheng, who had been silent for a long time, spoke abruptly. “Your Highness.”

“Yes?” Xie Lian answered immediately.

“How long did you stay in that coffin?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian blinked at the question. “I don’t remember.”

He just knew it had been a long, long time, so long that he didn’t want to count the years. There was pain, blood loss, hunger, hallucinations… At first, he didn’t even try to move a muscle, but later, he felt regret despite himself and pounded wildly at the coffin lid, desperate to break out. In the end, he allowed himself to sink into the boundless darkness once more.

It wasn’t the same kind of pain he experienced when he suffered a hundred stabs from a sword, a pain that made him sure he was doomed to eternal hell. Instead, it was a dull throb that went on and on without end.

He let out a sigh.

“What is it, Your Highness?” Hua Cheng immediately asked. “Does it still hurt?”

Xie Lian shook his head. A moment later, he mumbled, “Sorry, San Lang.”

Hua Cheng was puzzled. “Why are you apologizing to me?”

After some hesitation, Xie Lian said, “Today is your birthday. I wanted to make it a good day for you, but instead we spent the whole time stressed and trying to break that curse.”

He’d planned on bearing the pain at least until Hua Cheng’s birthday was over, but he hadn’t been able to hang on.

“Even the present I gave you had to be destroyed,” Xie Lian said.

And it was Hua Cheng himself who crushed it, no less. From beginning to end, today was a horrible ordeal. Xie Lian was extremely depressed, and it was hard to imagine how Hua Cheng must feel.

Hua Cheng stopped walking. "Your Highness," he said, his voice gentle, "you've already given me a present today."

Xie Lian blinked. "What?"

Please don't say "you're the best present" or something, Xie Lian thought. That'd only mortify him more.

Hua Cheng gazed at him and smiled. "Your Highness, you said that you wanted to see me even if it hurt you. That you didn't want to part, even when it caused you so much pain."

"…"

"That made me really happy," Hua Cheng finished, his voice low.

Recalling what a tragic sight he'd been when he said that to Hua Cheng, Xie Lian cleared his throat softly and covered his face, desperately trying to act natural. However, Hua Cheng suddenly pulled him into his firm embrace. Startled, Xie Lian allowed himself to be pressed against his faintly beating chest.

He heard Hua Cheng say in an even lower voice, "It's true—I'm really happy."

"…"

Me too, Xie Lian thought. *I'm really happy too.*

Over the endless centuries, no matter how painful it got, Hua Cheng had never even considered giving up on him.

It was Xie Lian, who had discovered that fact, who was truly the happiest.

They embraced each other tightly.

"That being said, as happy as I am, I never want you have to bear that sort of pain ever again," said Hua Cheng.

***

The two of them returned to Ghost City. The ghosts had been worried all day, so at the sight of the couple's safe return, they immediately turned their riotous chaos into boisterous celebration. As usual, Hua Cheng couldn't be bothered to comment; he just entered Thousand Lights Temple alongside Xie Lian.

As soon as they went inside, they discovered a whole host of new items had been added to the temple's horde.

"Who put these here?" Hua Cheng demanded.

Xie Lian picked up the items one by one. "They seem to be gift boxes? This one is from Lord Rain Master, I think. Such fresh vegetables… This one is from Qingxuan, it seems? All right, this one must be from General Pei…"

He counted the presents, growing ever more delighted as he went.

"San Lang! Congratulations. These are everyone's birthday gifts to the Lord Ghost King," Xie Lian said with a happy smile.

He had spent the past days like a man possessed, asking everyone he could find what he should give someone for a birthday present. Although he hadn't specified the recipient, there probably wasn't a single person who couldn't guess.

Hua Cheng, however, had no interest in the gifts whatsoever.

"Stop looking at them, gege," he said. "I'll throw them all out later. They take up space."

He looked as though he was seriously going to call for someone to chuck the presents, so Xie Lian hurriedly said, "Let's not do that. At the very least, these represent everyone's well-wishes… Wait, why is this here? Who gave you this?!"

The love potion and child-bearing pill were mixed in with the serious gifts. Shocked, he tossed them both aside like a hot potato, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Hua Cheng seemed rather interested, however, and was ready to grab them and take a peek.

"Hmm? What's this?"

Xie Lian quickly stopped him. "Nothing good! Don't look!"

***

After much internal conflict, Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng the belt he had personally made at the very beginning as a replacement for the longevity lock.

When Hua Cheng saw it, he laughed so hard he almost couldn't breathe—though ghosts didn't need to breathe in the first place. In any case, he wrapped his arms around Xie Lian and kissed him for a long while, complimenting him nonstop—he laid it on so thick that Xie Lian was embarrassed enough to lie flat on the bed and pretend to be dead.

And Xie Lian wanted to pretend to be dead even more when, the next morning, Hua Cheng actually put the thing on—and he was fully prepared to head out wearing it, acting like all was normal. Xie Lian nearly fainted when he saw and rolled off the bed at once to tackle the ghost king. He begged and pleaded for a long time before Hua Cheng very reluctantly agreed to wear it reversed, hiding the side showing the embroidered pattern. That was how Xie Lian narrowly escaped having his handiwork publicly shamed.

As for the consequences of that fateful day… Hua Cheng had caused such a great uproar about Xie Lian's condition that everyone from the Heavens above to the Earth below knew that Xie Lian had fainted on the ghost king's birthday. And once the full story got out, everyone from the Heavens above to the Earth below learned that Xie Lian was truly head over heels—he was absolutely, totally in love with Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

But that was a story for another time!

Heaven Official’s Blessing
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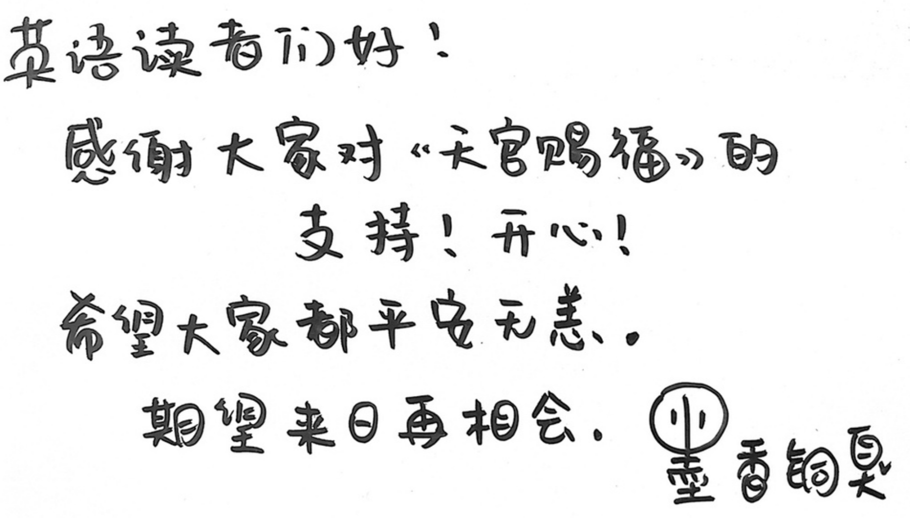


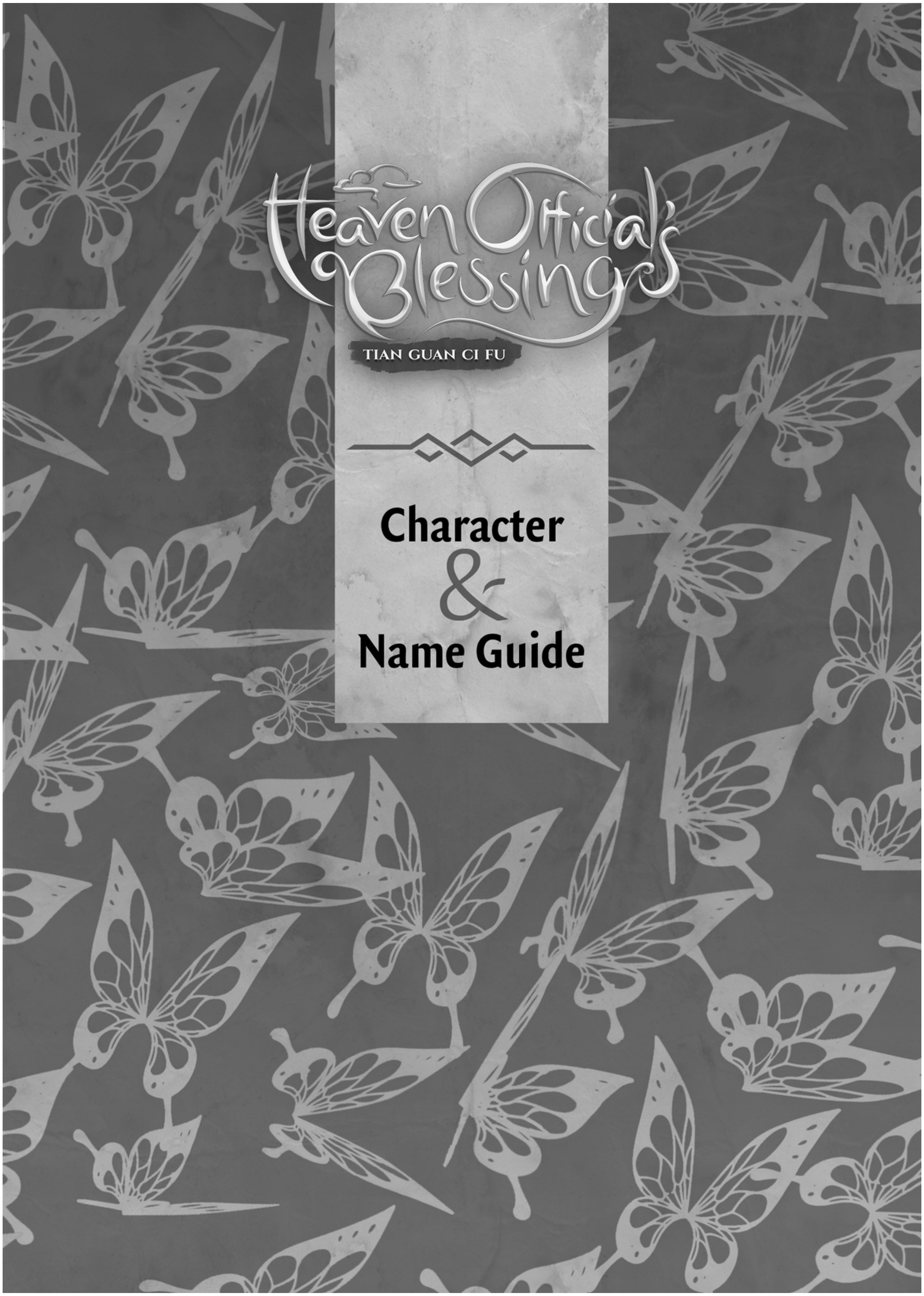
英语读者们好！

感谢大家对《天官赐福》的
支持！开心！
希望大家都平安无恙。
期望来日再相会。墨香铜臭

Hello, English readers!

Thank you for your support of *Heaven Official's Blessing.* I hope you're all safe and doing well. I hope we can meet again in the future!

–Mo Xiang Tong Xiu



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Xie Lian

谢怜 "THANK/WILT," "SYMPATHY/LOVE"

Heavenly Title: Xianle, "Heaven's Delight" (仙乐)

Four Famous Tales Title: The Prince Who Pleased God

Once the crown prince of the Kingdom of Xianle and the darling of the heavens, then a very unlucky twice-fallen god who eked out a meager living collecting scraps, and now a happily married god who still collects scraps on the side. As his bad luck tends to affect those around him, Xie Lian spent the last eight hundred years wandering in solitude. He accepted his lonely lot in life, or at least seemed to have a sense of humor about it. But even for this perpetually unlucky man, a chance encounter turned eight hundred years of unhappiness around—and heralded an eternity of wedded bliss with the love of his life.

Xie Lian has seen and done many things over his very long life and originally ascended as a martial god. While it was his scrap-collecting that saw him ascend for the third time, Xie Lian's feats of physicality are hardly anything to scoff at…though he'd sooner use them as part of a busking performance than to win a fight.

His title Xianle is a multi-layered nickname. "Xianle" is Xie Lian's official heavenly title and also the name of his kingdom. "Xianle" itself can translate to "Heaven's Delight," which ties into Xie Lian's "Four Famous Tales" moniker, "The Prince Who Pleased God." Jun Wu referring to Xie

Lian as “Xianle” sounds professional and businesslike on the surface (as Jun Wu generally refers to gods by their heavenly titles only), but it deliberately and not-so-subtly comes across as an affectionate term of endearment.

Hua Cheng

花城 “FLOWER,” “CITY”

Nickname: San Lang, “third,” “youth” (三郎)

Four Calamities Title: Crimson Rain Sought Flower

The fearsome king of ghosts and terror of the heavens. Dressed in his signature red, he controls vicious swarms of silver butterflies and wields the cursed scimitar known as Eming. His power and wealth are unmatched in the Three Realms, and for this he has as many worshippers as he does enemies (with considerable crossover between categories). He rules over the dazzling and otherworldly Ghost City in the Ghost Realm and is known to drop in to spectate at its infamous Gambler’s Den when he’s in a good mood.

In spite of all this, when it comes to Xie Lian, the Ghost King shows a much kinder and more respectful side of himself. He does not hesitate for a moment to sleep on a single straw mat in Xie Lian’s humble home, nor to get his hands dirty doing household chores at Puqi Shrine. That being said, Hua Cheng has only grown more mischievous as he and Xie Lian grew closer—and now that he and Xie Lian are living in wedded bliss, he is an absolute menace. From the very start, his secret identity as San Lang seemed to be no secret at all to Xie Lian, but Xie Lian still calls him by this name at Hua Cheng’s request.

Hua Cheng has been in love with Xie Lian for eight hundred long years, and his love is certain to grow ever deeper as he and Xie Lian spend the rest of eternity side by side.

Wuming

無名 “NAMELESS"

A nameless ghost in an ever-smiling mask. He seems to have been following Xie Lian since the bygone days of Xianle, though Xie Lian was unaware of his fealty at the time. He is staggeringly powerful and absolutely loyal to Xie Lian’s command.

Wuming has lingered as a ghost for the sake of the one he loves. He seeks to avenge the suffering his beloved endured at the hands of humanity and protect them from further harm—even though they likely don’t even know his name. Whoever his beloved might be, they are truly fortunate to garner such devotion.

Considering Wuming’s unconditional faith in Xie Lian, it is not surprising that he grew up to be Hua Cheng himself.

HEAVENLY OFFICIALS & HEAVENLY ASSOCIATES

Feng Xin

风信 "WIND," "TRUST/FAITH"

Heavenly Title: Nan Yang, "Southern Sun" (南陽)

The Martial God of the Southeast. He has a short fuse and foul mouth (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Mu Qing) but is known to be a dutiful, hardworking god. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the Kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian's bodyguard and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

In order to follow Xie Lian in secret, Feng Xin created an undercover identity for himself: Nan Feng, a Middle Court official. This failed to fool Xie Lian from the start, not in the least due to Feng Xin's completely unchanged personality and questionable ability to create a believable pseudonym: "Nan" / 南 is the same character as in Feng Xin's heavenly title, and "Feng" / 风 is the same character as in Feng Xin's proper name.

Jun Wu

君吾 "LORD," "I"

Heavenly Title: Shenwu, "Divine Might" (神武)

The Emperor of Heaven and strongest of the gods. He is composed and serene, and it is through his power and wisdom that the heavens remain aloft—quite literally. Although the heavens are full of schemers and gossipmongers, Jun Wu stands apart from such petty squabbles and is willing to listen to even the lowliest creatures to hear their pleas for justice. Despite this reputation for fairness, he does have his biases. In further contrast to the rest of the rabble in Heaven, he shows great patience and affection toward Xie Lian to the point that many grumble about favoritism.

Jun Wu was the crown prince and eventual god of the ancient kingdom of Wuyong. A series of unavoidable calamities saw his people turn against him, and his fellow gods took advantage of his moment of weakness to steal his power for themselves. Abandoned by all and tormented by those he once called friends, he slaughtered the gods and rose to power as Heavenly Emperor under a new identity. His resentment for humanity roils beneath his serene exterior even now; he must exert significant effort to refrain from mass murder and destruction.

He longs for someone who will truly understand him and stay by his side no matter what. Thanks to a chance encounter on Yinian Bridge eight hundred years ago, he set out to make Xie Lian that special someone—no matter the cost.

Ling Wen

灵文 “INGENIOUS LITERATUS”

Heavenly Title: Ling Wen

The top civil god and also the most overworked. Unlike the majority of gods, she is addressed by her colleagues and most others by her heavenly title. She is one of the rare female civil gods and worked tirelessly (and thanklessly) for many years to earn her position. Ling Wen is exceedingly competent at all things bureaucratic, and her work keeps Heaven’s business running (mostly) smoothly. She is the creator and head admin of Heaven’s communication array.

These days, her name Nangong Jie [南宫杰, “South” 南 / “Palace” 宫 / “Hero” 杰] is only used by her close friend Pei Ming—though he usually calls her the friendly nickname “Noble Jie.” She is also close to Shi Wudu, who is known in the heavens for his self-serving personality. Their friend group is dubbed the “Three Tumors.”

Mu Qing

慕情 “YEARNING,” “AFFECTION”

Heavenly Title: Xuan Zhen, “Enigmatic Truth” (玄真)

The Martial God of the Southwest. He has a short fuse and sharp tongue (especially when it comes to his longstanding nemesis, Feng Xin) and is known for being cold, spiteful, and petty. He has a complicated history with Xie Lian: long ago, in their days in the Kingdom of Xianle, he used to serve as Xie Lian's personal servant and was a close friend until circumstances drove them apart.

In order to follow Xie Lian in secret, Mu Qing created an undercover identity for himself: Fu Yao, a Middle Court official. This failed to fool Xie Lian from the start, not in the least due to Mu Qing's completely unchanged personality and self-aggrandizing naming tendencies: "Fu Yao" / 扶摇 is a figure of speech for someone who is skilled or ambitious.

Pei Ming

裴茗 SURNAME PEI, "TENDER TEA LEAVES"

Heavenly Title: Ming Guang, "Bright Illumination" (明光)

Four Famous Tales Title: The General Who Snapped His Sword

The Martial God of the North. General Pei is a powerful and popular god, and over the years he has gained a reputation as a womanizer. This reputation is deserved: Pei Ming's ex-lovers are innumerable and hail from all the Three Realms. He is close friends with Ling Wen and Shi Wudu, who are also known in the heavens for their self-serving personalities. This friend group is dubbed the "Three Tumors."

Pei Xiu is Pei Ming's indirect descendant, and Pei Ming took him under his wing to help advance his career in the heavens. He was very displeased when Pei Xiu ruined that career for Banyue's sake, but he seems to have accepted the situation and does not hold a grudge against Xie Lian for his involvement in uncovering the scandal.

Pei Xiu

裴宿 SURNAME PEI, "CONSTELLATION"

Heavenly Title: N/A

An exiled martial god and a distant (and indirect) descendant of Pei Ming. He's usually called "Little Pei" or "General Pei Junior" for this reason. He is often called in to clean up after his ancestor's messes, but regardless of the circumstances, he always maintains his composure with a polite yet detached air. His ascension to godhood occurred because he led the charge to slaughter the Kingdom of Banyue, and his exile from godhood occurred because of his morally dubious attempts to save his childhood friend Banyue from her fate of eternal punishment.

Quan Yizhen

权一真 “POWER/AUTHORITY,” “ONE,” “TRUTH/GENUINE”

Heavenly Title: Qi Ying, “Stupendous Hero” (奇英)

The (current) Martial God of the West. He previously shared this title with his shixiong, Yin Yu. After Yin Yu was banished from heaven, Quan Yizhen holds the title alone. He still yearns for his shixiong’s companionship and is convinced that their falling-out was caused by a misunderstanding.

Quan Yizhen has a single-minded focus on martial arts and is considered a prodigy even among heaven’s elite. He also has a reputation for beating up his own followers, though this somehow does not damage his popularity in the Mortal Realm. While his skill cannot be disparaged, he is widely disliked in the heavens for his lack of social etiquette. He cares not for the friendship or opinions of his fellow gods, though he has warmed up to Xie Lian.

Rain Master

雨师篁 “RAIN,” "MASTER," "BAMBOO GROVE"

Heavenly Title: Rain Master

The elemental master of rain, proper name Yushi Huang. Ascended to the heavens shortly before Xie Lian’s own first ascension. The Rain Master is a reclusive heavenly official who is known to reside on a secluded mountain farm named Yushi Country (雨师乡) with many subordinates working in the fields. One of these subordinates is an intelligent talking ox, who is also capable of transforming into a human form that’s equally as beefy as his bovine build.

While the Rain Master prefers a quiet and modest life of agriculture, any nefarious creature that’s foolish enough to target the domain’s farm hands is in for a very rude awakening indeed…

Shi Qingxuan

师青玄 “MASTER,” “VERDANT GREEN/BLUE,” “MYSTERIOUS/BLACK”

Heavenly Title: Wind Master

Four Famous Tales Title: The Young Lord Who Poured Wine

The former elemental master of wind and younger sibling of the former Water Master, Shi Wudu. Shi Qingxuan ascended as a male god, but over the years, he began to be worshipped as a female version of himself. Shi Qingxuan eagerly embraced this and leapt at any opportunity to go out on the town in her female form…and tried to drag all of her companions into the fun.

Shi Qingxuan went missing after the shocking Black Water Scandal, only to be found destitute in the imperial capital without spiritual power—but kind and high-spirited nevertheless. They’re still Shi Qingxuan, after all.

Shi Qingxuan is as flighty and pushy as the element they once commanded, and although their wealth is now nothing but a memory, they remain generous with their time and care. They possess a strong sense of justice and will not be dissuaded by notions of propriety. Despite everything that transpired between the two of them, they appear to have lingering fondness for the former “Earth Master” who went by the name Ming Yi.

GHOST REALM & GHOST REALM ASSOCIATES

Bai Jing

白锦 "WHITE BROCADE"

The human spirit fused with the Brocade Immortal. He was once a young man with immense talent in martial arts who was destined for godhood. However, his life was gruesomely cut short when the girl he was in love with manipulated him into dismembering himself. That girl was Nangong Jie, better known as Ling Wen.

Banyue

半月 "HALF-MOON"

Former state preceptor of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath ghost. She is a scrawny young woman who nonetheless possesses the power to call upon and control deadly scorpion-snakes. Despite her gloomy disposition, she earnestly wishes to save others from suffering, even if it means that she has to suffer in their stead.

Cuocuo

错错 "MISTAKE" (A CHILDISH TERM, LIKE "OOPSIE")

A malice-level ghost resembling a monstrous-looking human fetus. It targets pregnant women and seeks to usurp the place of the children in their wombs—killing both mother and unborn child in the process. Its mother is Lan Chang (also known as Jian Lan), and its father is none other than Feng Xin. That being said, Cuocuo clearly doesn't consider Feng Xin worthy of filial respect, and Feng Xin cannot bear acknowledging such a creature as his own son.

He Xuan

贺玄 "CONGRATULATE," "BLACK," "MYSTERIOUS"

Four Calamities Title: Ship-Sinking Black Water

One of the Four Calamities, Ship-Sinking Black Water. He is a mysterious and reclusive water ghost who rules the South Sea. Like Hua Cheng, he won the bloody gauntlet at Mount Tonglu and wields the power of a supreme ghost. He is consumed by ceaseless hunger and is driven by an equally consuming lust for revenge.

He Xuan disguised himself as the Earth Master Ming Yi for many centuries, and during this masquerade he cultivated a friendship with Shi Qingxuan. Although founded on falsehood, the feelings of friendship that "Ming-xiong" held for Shi Qingxuan seemed to be legitimate.

Black Water has a strange relationship with Hua Cheng. The two can hardly be considered friends, but they frequently work together to further their own personal interests—He Xuan was Hua Cheng's spy in the heavens for centuries, and in return, Hua Cheng loaned him large sums of money and resources. Despite providing essential intel over the years, He Xuan remains deep in debt to him.

Kemo

刻磨 "MILLSTONE"

A former general of the Kingdom of Banyue, now a wrath-level ghost. He bears great resentment against the State Preceptor of Banyue, even after his own death, and great hatred for the long-dead kingdom that destroyed his own.

Lan Chang

蘭菖 "GLADIOLUS [FLOWER]"

A malice-level ghost. Formerly a prostitute in Ghost City and now on the run with her monstrous child, the fetus spirit Cuocuo. She is hardly as delicate as her floral name implies—when it comes to throwing insults around on the streets of Ghost City, she can give as good as she gets. In Chinese flower language, the gladiolus flower means "tryst" (for romantic rendezvous) and also "absence." She was formerly known as Jian Lan (剑兰), which is another term for the same flower.

Jian Lan was once a citizen of Xianle, and no ordinary one at that—her family was wealthy and influential, and she was even briefly in the running to be named the crown prince's consort. After the fall of Xianle, she was forced into service at a brothel, where she conceived Cuocuo during a brief doomed romance with Feng Xin. An unknown assailant targeted her and carved her unborn son out of her stomach to forge him into a monster, killing Jian Lan in the process and causing her to linger in the living world as a vengeful ghost.

Lang Ying (Ghost Child)

郎萤 "YOUTH," "FIREFLY"

A mysterious ghost child afflicted with Human Face Disease. He has known nothing but abuse for hundreds of years due to his horrifying appearance, save for the fleeting kindness and warmth of the human girl Xiao-Ying. The combination of this trauma and his almost total lack of human interaction has left him mostly mute and constantly on high alert. Xie Lian was the one to give him this name: Lang being the national surname of Yong'an, and Ying to commemorate the girl who once took care of him.

Qi Rong

戚容 "FACE OF SORROW" OR "RELATIVE," "TOLERANCE/FACE"

Four Calamities Title: Night-Touring Green Lantern

One of the Four Calamities, also called the "Green Ghost." Unlike the other three Calamities, he's actually only a wrath ghost, not a supreme. Gods and ghosts alike agree that he was only included in the group to bump up the number to an even four. (Also, he's just that big a pest.) He is infamous for his crude behavior and ostentatious attempts to copy the style of the more successful Calamities, as well as for his ravenous appetite for human flesh.

His crimes expanded to include kidnapping and body-snatching, as he possessed the body of a human man and in doing so acquired a young son named Guzi. In a surprising turn of events, Qi Rong developed an attachment to the boy that led to him sacrificing himself to save Guzi's life.

Qi Rong is Xie Lian’s younger cousin on his mother’s side, much to Xie Lian’s everlasting dismay. Surprising no one, Qi Rong has been a source of stress and trouble ever since their mortal childhoods in Xianle. His royal title in Xianle was Prince Xiao Jing.

Rong Guang

容广 “APPEARANCE/TOLERATE,” “VAST/NUMEROUS”

A former military officer of the fallen Kingdom of Xuli. He was once Pei Ming’s right-hand man and close friend; they were close enough for General Pei to name his sword “Mingguang,” a portmanteau of their names. However, he now seeks revenge against Pei Ming as a malice-level ghost fused with that same broken sword.

White No-Face

白无相 “WHITE NO-FACE”

Four Calamities Title: White-Clothed Calamity

One of the Four Calamities, White No-Face is mysterious, cruel, and powerful enough to battle with the Heavenly Emperor himself—truly, a supreme among supremes. He destroyed the Kingdom of Xianle with the Human Face Disease pandemic. His peculiar fixation on Xie Lian is unnerving, as are his equally peculiar displays of affection.

White No-Face is a creation of Jun Wu’s, made with a single purpose: to drive Xie Lian down the path chosen for him. White No-Face ultimately failed in this mission, thwarted by a passerby’s bamboo hat.

Xuan Ji

宣姬 “DECLARE,” “PROCLAIM” / “CONCUBINE [ARCHAIC]”

A former general of the Kingdom of Yushi, now a wrath-level ghost. Also known as the Ghost Bride. She is obsessed with Pei Ming, who rejected her affections after she tried to take their physical-only relationship to the next level. Her fury at being scorned led to the gruesome deaths of many happy brides-to-be and her eventual imprisonment under heavenly law.

Yin Yu

引玉 "ATTRACT," "JADE"

Yin Yu, also known as the Waning Moon Officer (下弦月使), is Hua Cheng's right-hand man, subordinate, and all-around errand runner. He has been described by some as having a very weak sense of presence and a forgettable appearance. He bears a cursed shackle on his wrist, which marks him as a banished heavenly official. Yin Yu is the former Martial God of the West, who was cast out of Heaven after an incident where he endangered the life of his shidi, Quan Yizhen. He has mixed feelings toward his shidi, and even more mixed feelings over said shidi's dogged insistence on rekindling their former friendship.

Yin Yu's name is taken from the idiom 抛砖引玉/ "pao zhuan yin yu," or "throwing out a brick to attract a jade." It describes the act of making a rudimentary suggestion that is intended to prompt others to come forward with better ideas.

MORTAL REALM & MORTAL REALM ASSOCIATES

Guzi

谷子 "MILLET"

A young human child who Qi Rong kidnapped as a byproduct of stealing the body of the boy's father. Because Qi Rong is possessing Guzi's father, the poor little boy seems blissfully unaware that he's in any danger at all, though that hardly prevents him from enduring plenty of suffering at Qi Rong's hands.

Lang Ying

郎英 "YOUTH," "HERO"

A Yong'an man who Xie Lian made the acquaintance of in the Xianle era. He is a troubled man who has lost much—some might say everything—to the drought and famine that struck his home region. After toppling the Kingdom of Xianle in a bloody civil war, he was named king of the new Kingdom of Yong'an.

Heaven's Eye

天眼开 "HEAVEN'S EYE"

A wealthy, pompous human cultivator who leads a team of cultivators with a similar member profile. Despite his personality flaws, his powers are the real deal. His third eye can see the unseen, and in the process inadvertently reveal exactly how you've been "borrowing spiritual energy" recently.

Mei Nianqing

梅念卿 "PLUM BLOSSOM" / "TO LECTURE," "TO LONG FOR" / FRIENDLY DIMINUTIVE BETWEEN SPOUSES/CLOSE FRIENDS (ALSO USED BY EMPERORS TOWARD THEIR MINISTERS)

A mysterious and powerful cultivator who specializes in the art of astrological divination. He is very easily distracted by the allure of a game of cards.

In the Xianle era, he was the leader of a quartet of cultivators who served as the kingdom's state preceptors—however, he was not a Xianle native and deliberately obscured his true origins as a citizen of the ancient kingdom of Wuyong and close friend and confidant of Jun Wu. He was the religious leader and head instructor at the Royal Holy Temple, Xianle's premiere cultivation school and largest place of worship for several gods. Mei Nianqing has a close relationship with Xie Lian, his most cherished student (and his biggest headache), and a very complicated relationship with Jun Wu.

The plum blossom in Mei Nianqing's name is a symbol of endurance in Chinese flower language, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the junzi (the ideal Confucian gentleman).

Xianle Royal Family

The king and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle, and Xie Lian's parents. Xie Lian's father is of the ruling Xie (谢 "to thank/to wilt") clan, and his mother is of the Min (悯 "to feel pity for/commiserate with") clan. Xie Lian is very close with his mother, who is a doting—if rather naive and sheltered—parent. Xie Lian has a more contentious relationship with his father and frequently squabbles with him.

When Xie Lian's given name (怜 / lian) and his mother's clan name (悯 / min) are written together, they form the word "compassion" (怜悯 / lianmin).

SENTIENT WEAPONS AND SPIRITUAL OBJECTS

Brocade Immortal

锦衣仙 “BROCADE,” “IMMORTAL”

A semi-sentient brocade robe possessed by the ghost of a human man, Bai Jing. The name of this object is meant to be a play on the name of the spirit of the man who inhabits it. The Brocade Immortal is an immensely powerful and dangerous artifact—those who wear it can be controlled like puppets if they were given the robe by a person with nefarious intent, and even gods are not immune to its effect.

Eming

厄命 “TERRIBLE/WRETCHED,” “FATE”

Hua Cheng’s sentient scimitar. With a single bloodred eye that peers out from its silver hilt, it is a cursed blade that drinks the blood of its victims and is the bane of the heavens. It enjoys nothing more than receiving praise and hugs from Xie Lian, and its childish, forward personality is a great embarrassment to its ghostly master.

Fangxin

芳心 “AFFECTIONS OF A YOUNG WOMAN”

An ancient black sword with ties to Xie Lian. An antique, it easily tires when dealing with high-flying heavenly adventures. Xie Lian used the sword’s name as an alias while serving as the State Preceptor of Yong’an.

Fangxin originally belonged to the Crown Prince of Wuyong, and its true name as given by Jun Wu is Zhuxin (誅心, “Intent to Execute” / “Executed Heart”). It is far less feeble in the hands of its true owner. Jun Wu gave it to Xie Lian while in the form of White No-Face in the hope that he would continue the blade’s calamitous legacy, but he saw his wishes frustrated time and again.

Mingguang

明光

Pei Ming’s famously broken sword named after a portmanteau of the sounds from Pei Ming and Rong Guang’s names. Rong Guang fused with it to seek revenge.

Ruoye

若邪 “LIKE/AS IF,” “EVIL” OR “SWORD”

Xie Lian’s sentient strip of white silk. It is an earnest and energetic sort, if a bit nervous sometimes, and will go to great lengths to protect Xie Lian—quite literally, as it can stretch out to almost limitless dimensions.

Locations

Heavenly Realm

The Heavenly Capital is a divine city built upon the clouds. Amidst flowing streams and auspicious clouds, luxurious palaces dot the landscape, serving as the personal residences and offices of the gods. The Grand Avenue of Divine Might serves as the realm's main thoroughfare, and this road leads directly to the Palace of Divine Might—the Heavenly Emperor's residence where court is held.

The Heavenly Court consists of two sub-courts: the Upper Court and the Middle Court. The Upper Court consists entirely of ascended gods, while the Middle Court consists of officials who—while remarkable and skilled in their own right—have not yet ascended to godhood.

Mortal Realm

The realm of living humans. Often receives visitors from the other two realms.

Kingdom of Xianle

仙乐 "HEAVEN'S DELIGHT" OR "HEAVENLY MUSIC"

A fallen kingdom, once glamorous and famed for its riches and its people's love for the finer things in life—such as art, music, gold, and the finest thing of all, their beloved crown prince, Xie Lian. Xianle's gilded exterior masked a declining kingdom plagued by corruption, and Xie Lian's meddling hastened its inevitable collapse in a most disastrous fashion.

Xianle's largest cultivation center, the Royal Holy Temple, sprawled across the peaks of the auspicious Mount Taicang. Its qi-rich landscape nurtures the blanketing forests of fruit trees and flame-red maples. The mountain hosted the kingdom's largest Palace of Xianle for worship of Xie Lian after his ascension, and the Xianle Imperial Mausoleum is located far underground.

Kingdom of Wuyong

乌庸 “CROW/BLACK,” “MEDIOCRE/ORDINARY/TO HIRE”

An ancient kingdom that was destroyed over two thousand years ago in a volcanic apocalypse and wiped from the annals of history. Mount Tonglu looms at the center of this once-prosperous realm, forever brewing chaos and destruction within its fiery womb. Wuyong is sealed within an evil domain that only opens when Mount Tonglu issues its call to slaughter. Its landscape and remaining wildlife have been distorted by the enormously evil power that periodically spews from the depths of the mountain. However, one just might be able to piece together the remaining fragments of its shattered civilization and learn the truth about what took place during its last days…

Kingdom of Yong’an

永安 “ETERNAL PEACE”

A fallen but once-prosperous kingdom. Yong’an began its existence as an impoverished city located within the Kingdom of Xianle. It later became a powder keg of social unrest, which kicked off a lengthy and bloody civil war that eventually resulted in Xianle’s end.

The Kingdom of Yong’an rose out of the ashes of the Kingdom of Xianle after the latter’s collapse, but it very soon fell to the very same corruption and excess that doomed Xianle.

Puqi Village

菩荠村 “WATER CHESTNUT”

A tiny village in the countryside, named for the water chestnuts *(puqi)* that grow in abundance nearby. While small and unsophisticated, its villagers are friendly and welcoming to weary travelers who wish to stay a while. The humble Puqi Shrine—under reconstruction and welcoming donations—can be found here, as well as its resident god, Xie Lian.

Ghost Realm

The Ghost Realm is the home of almost all dead humans, and far less organized and bureaucratic than the Heavenly Realm. Ghosts may leave or be trapped away from the Ghost Realm under some circumstances, which causes major problems for ordinary humans and gods alike.

Black Water Demon Lair

The domain of the reclusive Supreme Ghost King who rules the South Sea, Ship-Sinking Black Water. If one is unfortunate enough to wander into his territory, it will quickly become their final resting place. Should they avoid being eaten alive by the colossal skeletal fish that serve as threshold guardians, the sea itself will devour them instead. Nothing can float upon the waters of the Black Water Demon Lair—all intruders are forfeit to the abyss.

It is said that Ship-Sinking Black Water dwells on Black Water Island, located at the heart of his realm. His residence on the island is called the Nether Water Manor. In stark contrast to Hua Cheng's lively Ghost City, Black Water Island is a silent, gloomy place with few residents other than the master himself.

Ghost City

The largest city in the Ghost Realm, founded and ruled by Hua Cheng. It is a dazzling den of vice, sin, and all things wicked, which makes it the number-one spot for visitors from all three realms to shop for nefarious goods and cavort under the glow of the blood-red lanterns.

Hua Cheng is rarely present in the city and does not often make public appearances. On the occasion he is in the mood to do so, he is met with considerable adoration; clearly, Ghost City's citizens love their Chengzhu and respect him immensely. His residence within the city is the secluded Paradise Manor, which has never seen guests—at least until Xie Lian came to call, of course.

The city is also home to the beautiful, secluded Thousand Lights Temple, which Hua Cheng dedicated to Xie Lian for reasons the man was initially reluctant to elaborate on but are rather obvious in retrospect. It serves triple-duty as a place of worship, a place for Xie Lian to accept carnal offerings of spiritual energy from his husband, and a private school of calligraphy—though it bears noting that Xie Lian has made absolutely no progress on teaching Hua Cheng to write legibly.

Other/Unknown

Mount Tonglu

铜炉山 "COPPER KILN MOUNTAIN"

Mount Tonglu is a volcano within the domain of the fallen Kingdom of Wuyong, and the location of the Kiln, where new ghost kings are born. Every few hundred years, tens of thousands of ghosts descend upon the city for a massive battle royale. Only two ghosts have ever survived the slaughter and made it out—one of those two was Hua Cheng.

Name Guide
Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: A word for “son” or “child.” Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone “Little” or “Sonny.”

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, and has childish or cutesy connotations.

Family

DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend. Casual.

GE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Can be used alone or with the person’s name.

GEGE: Familiar way to refer to an older brother or an older male friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “ge.”

JIEJIE: Familiar way to refer to an older sister or an older female friend, used by someone substantially younger or of lower status. Has a cutesier feel than “jie,” and rarely used by older males.

MEIMEI: Younger sister or an unrelated younger female friend. Casual.

XIONG: Older brother. Generally used as an honorific. Formal, but also used informally between male friends of equal status.

YIFU: Maternal uncle (husband of maternal aunt), respectful address.

YIMU: Maternal aunt, respectful address.

Cultivation, Martial Arts, and Immortals

-JUN: A suffix meaning “lord.”

-ZUN: A suffix meaning “esteemed, venerable.” More respectful than “-jun.”

DAOZHANG: A polite address for Daoist cultivators, equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name—for example, one could refer to Xie Lian as “Daozhang” or “Xie Daozhang.”

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect.

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect.

YUANJUN: Title for high class female Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

ZHENJUN: Title for average male Daoist deity. Can be used alone as a title or as a suffix.

Other

CHENGZHU: A title for the master/ruler of an independent city-state.

GONGZI: Young master of an affluent household.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at ***sevenseasdanmei.com***

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

ren jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh

DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon

-JŪN: june

DÌDÌ: dee-dee

GĒGĒ: guh-guh

JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay

MÈIMEI: may-may

-XIÓNG: shong

Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may

WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah

XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah

QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)

Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)

C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)

IU: yoh

UO: wuh

ZHI: jrr

CHI: chrr

SHI: shrr

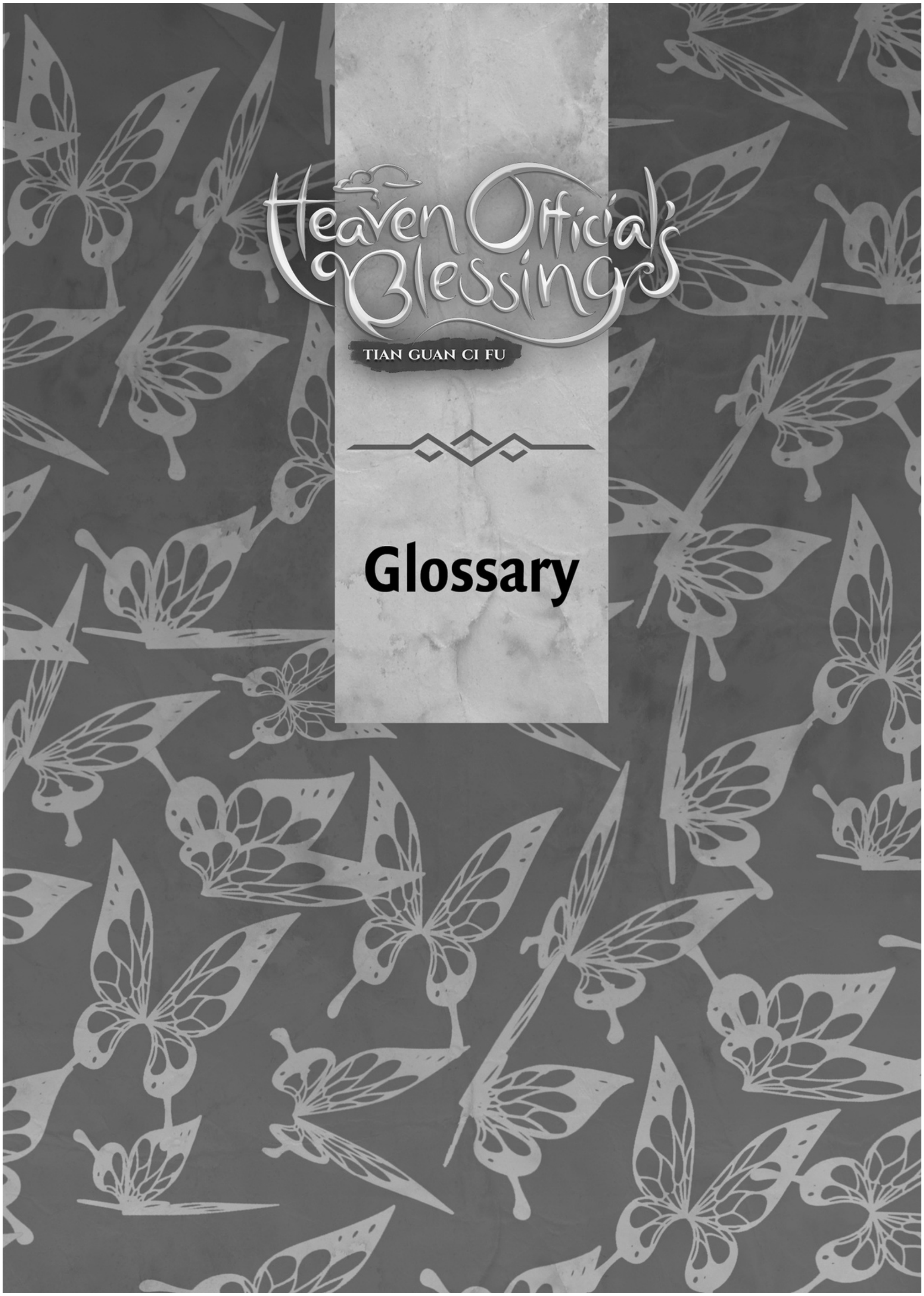
RI: rrr

ZI: zzz

CI: tsz

SI: ssz

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.



Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the governing law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story’s central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Heaven Official’s Blessing was first serialized on the website *JJWXC*.

TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

ASCENSION: In typical xianxia tales, gods are conceived naturally and born divine. Immortals cannot attain godhood but can achieve great longevity. In *Heaven Official's Blessing,* however, both gods and immortals were born mortal and either cultivated deeply or committed great deeds and attained godhood after transcending the Heavenly Tribulation. Their bodies shed the troubles of a mortal form and are removed from the corporeal world.

AUSPICIOUS CLOUDS: A sign of good fortune and the divine, auspicious clouds are also often seen as methods of transport for gods and immortals in myth. The idea springs from the obvious association with clouds and the sky/heavens, and also because yun (云 / "cloud") and yun (运 / "luck") sound similar.

BOWING: Bowing is a social custom in many Asian nations. There are several varieties of bow in Chinese culture, which are distinguished by how low the bow goes as well as any associated hand gestures. A deeper bow indicates more respect, and those with high social status will always expect a deeper bow from those with low status. The kowtow (see associated glossary entry) is the most respectful level of bow. "Standing down in a bow" means holding a bowing position while leaving someone's presence.

BUDAOWENG: A budaoweng (不倒翁 / "wobbly old man") is an oblong doll, weighted so that it rolls back into an upright position whenever it is knocked down.

CHINESE CALENDAR: The Chinese calendar uses the *Tian Gan Di Zhi* (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system, rather than numbers, to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems (original meanings lost) and twelve earthly branches (associated with the zodiac), each represented by a written character. Each stem and branch is associated with either yin or yang, and one of the elemental properties: wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The stems and branches are combined in cyclical patterns to create a calendar where every unit of time is associated with certain attributes.

This is what a character is asking for when inquiring for the date/time of birth (生辰八字 / "eight characters of birth date/time"). Analyzing the stem/branch characters and their elemental associations was considered essential information in divination, fortune-telling, matchmaking, and even business deals.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the Dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth and prosperity, and often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (孝 / "filial piety"). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student toward a teacher, or people of a country toward their ruler.

COUGHING/SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

(See also Seven Apertures/Qiqiao.)

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial arts who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while attaining personal strength and extending their life span. Cultivation is a long process marked by “stages.” There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

- ◇ Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (凝气/练气)
- ◇ Foundation Establishment (筑基)
- ◇ Core Formation/Golden Core (结丹/金丹)
- ◇ Nascent Soul (元婴)
- ◇ Deity Transformation (化神)
- ◇ Great Ascension (大乘)
- ◇ Heavenly Tribulation (渡劫)

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret or advanced training technique and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is something being marked with a price of “one liang of silver.”

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *dao* (道), known as “the way.” Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and who can affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil.

DISCIPLES: Cultivation sect members are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into Core, Inner, and Outer rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

When formally joining a sect as a disciple or a student, the sect becomes like the disciple's new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one's sect is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DRAGON: Great chimeric beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS MAP: Also known as the bagua or pakua, an eight trigrams map is a Daoist diagram containing eight symbols that represent the fundamentals of reality, including the five elements. They often feature a symbol for yin and yang in the center as a representation of perfect balance between opposing forces.

ENTRANCE COUPLETS: Written poetry verses that are posted outside the door of a building. The two lines of poetry on the sides of the door express the meaning/theme of the establishment, or are a wish for good luck. The horizontal verse on the top summarizes or is the subject of the couplets.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FENG SHUI: Literally translates to wind-water. Refers to the natural laws believed to govern the flow of qi in the arrangement of the natural environment and man-made structures. Favorable feng shui and good qi flow have various beneficial effects to everyday life and the practice of cultivation, while the opposite is true for unfavorable feng shui and bad qi flow.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases"). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

- Wood (木 / mu)
- Fire (火 / huo)
- Earth (土 / tu)
- Metal (金 / jin)
- Water (水 / shui)

Flowers:

LOTUS: Associated with Buddhism. It rises untainted from the muddy waters it grows in, and thus symbolizes ultimate purity of the heart and mind.

PINE (TREE): A symbol of evergreen sentiment / everlasting affection.

PLUM (BLOSSOMING TREE): A symbol of endurance, as it blooms in the depths of winter. The plum blossom is also one of the four flowers of the ideal Confucian gentleman.

WILLOW (TREE): A symbol of lasting affection and friendship. Also is a symbol of farewell and can mean “urging someone to stay.” “Meeting under the willows” can connote a rendezvous.

FUNERALS: Daoist or Buddhist funerals generally last for forty-nine days. It is a common belief that souls of the dead return home on the night of the sixth day after their death. There are different rituals depending on the region regarding what is done when the spirit returns, but generally they are all intended to guide the spirit safely back to the family home without getting lost; these rituals are generally referred to by the umbrella term “Calling the Spirit on the Seventh Day.”

During the funeral ceremony, mourners can present the deceased with offerings of food, incense, and joss paper. If deceased ancestors have no patrilineal descendants to give them offerings, they may starve in the afterlife and become hungry ghosts. Wiping out a whole family is punishment for more than just the living.

After the funeral, the coffin is nailed shut and sealed with paper talismans to protect the body from evil spirits. The deceased is transported in a procession to their final resting place, often accompanied by loud music to scare off evil spirits. Cemeteries are usually on hillsides; the higher a grave is located, the better the feng shui. The traditional mourning color is white.

GHOST: Ghosts (鬼) are the restless spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts produce yin energy and crave yang energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

Water ghosts are a notable subset of ghosts. They are drowned humans who haunt the place of their death and seek to drag unsuspecting victims underwater to possess their bodies, steal their identities, and take their places in the world of the living. The victim then becomes a water ghost themselves and repeats the process by hunting new victims. This process is known as *tishen* / 替身 (“substitution”). In *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, there is a clear story parallel between the behavior of water ghosts and the birth and actions of Ship-Sinking Black Water.

GUQIN: A seven-stringed zither, played by plucking with the fingers. Sometimes called a qin. It is fairly large and is meant to be laid flat on a surface or on one’s lap while playing.

GU SORCERY: The concept of gu (蛊 / “poison”) is common in wuxia and xianxia stories. In more realistic settings, it may refer to crafting poisons that are extracted from venomous insects and creatures. Things like snakes, toads, and bugs are generally associated with the idea of gu, but it can also apply to monsters, demons, and ghosts. The effects of gu poison are bewitchment and manipulation. “Swayed by gu” has become a common phrase meaning “lost your mind/been led astray” in modern Chinese vocabulary.

HAND GESTURES: The baoquan (抱拳 / “hold fist”) is a martial arts salute where one places their closed right fist against their open left palm. The gongshou (拱手 / “arch hand”) is a more generic salute not specific to martial artists, where one drapes their open left palm over their closed right fist. The orientation of both of these salutes is reversed for women. During funerals, the closed hand in both salutes switches, where men will use their left fist and women their right.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

HEAVENLY CAVES AND BLESSED LANDS: Refers to a collection of sacred sites in Daoism. There are said to be ten large caves, thirty-six small caves, and seventy-two blessed lands in existence. They are places with excellent feng shui and are therefore flourishing with life and rich in spiritual energy/qi. These sites are ideal training spots for cultivators who seek to achieve immortality or heavenly ascension.

HEAVENLY REALM: An imperial court of enlightened beings. Some hold administrative roles, while others watch over and protect a specific aspect of the celestial and mortal realm, such as love, marriage, a piece of land, etc. There are also carefree immortals who simply wander the world and help mortals as they go, or become hermits deep in the mountains.

HEAVENLY TRIBULATION: Before a Daoist cultivator can ascend to the heavens, they must go through a trial known as a Heavenly Tribulation. In stories where the heavens are depicted with a more traditional nine-level structure, even gods themselves must endure and overcome tribulations if they want to level up. The nature of these trials vary, but the most common version involves navigating a powerful lightning storm. To fail means losing one’s attained divine stage and cultivation.

HUALIAN: Shortened name for the relationship between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

IMMORTALS AND IMMORTALITY: Immortals have transcended mortality through cultivation. They possess long lives, are immune to illness and aging, and have various magical powers. An immortal can progress to godhood if they pass a Heavenly Tribulation. The exact life span of immortals differs from story to story, and in some they only live for three or four hundred years.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and usually limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes.

In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, the incense sticks being referenced are the small sticks one offers when praying at a shrine, so "one incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike have made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade." Other colors of jade will usually be specified in the text.

JADE EMPEROR: In Daoist cosmology, the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) is the emperor of heaven, the chief of the heavenly court, and one of the highest-ranked gods in the heavenly realm, lower only to the three primordial emanations. When one says "Oh god/lord" or "My heavens," it is usually referring to the Jade Emperor. In *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Jun Wu's role replaces that of the Jade Emperor.

JOSS PAPER: Also referred to as ghost paper, joss paper is a form of paper crafting used to make offerings to the deceased. The paper can be folded into various shapes and is burned as an offering, allowing the deceased person to utilize the gift the paper represents in the realm of the dead. Common gifts include paper money, houses, clothing, toiletries, and dolls to act as the deceased's servants.

KOWTOW: The *kowtow* (叩头 / “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity.

LONGEVITY LOCK: A longevity lock is a piece of jewelry crafted in the shape of an ancient lock, usually made of gold or silver. It is worn on a chain as a necklace. They are customarily given to newborns to dispel misfortune and therefore “lock” their lives.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL: Zhongqiu Jie (中秋節), or the Mid-Autumn Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Lunar Calendar. It typically falls around September-October on the Western Calendar. This festival is heavily associated with reunions, both family and otherwise. Mooncakes—also known as reunion cakes, as they are meant to be shared—are a popular food item associated with this festival. Much like the Shangyuan Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival involves the lighting of lanterns to worship the heavens. It is also commonly associated with courtship and matchmaking.

Numbers

TWO: Two (二 / “er”) is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom “good things come in pairs.” It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (三 / “san”) sounds like *sheng* (生 / “living”) and also like *san* (散 / “separation”).

FOUR: Four (四 / "si") sounds like *si* (死 / "death"). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (七 / "qi") sounds like *qi* (齊 / "together"), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like *qi* (欺 / "deception").

EIGHT: Eight (八 / "ba") sounds like *fa* (發 / "prosperity"), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (九 / "jiu") is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX's work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege ("second brother Lan") as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang ("third youth") when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

PHOENIX: *Fenghuang* (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary chimeric bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the Empress, and happy marriages.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PLAGUES AND DISEASE: In ancient China, plagues and pandemics were considered to be the work of demons or other evil creatures, and were thought to be karmic punishment from the heavens for humanity's evil deeds. It was thought that the gods would protect the righteous and innocent from catching the disease, and mass repentance was the only way to "cure" or banish a plague for good. When the gods determined the punishment served to be sufficient, they would descend and drive out the plague-causing demons.

This outlook is why Human Face Disease is considered in-universe to be a mark against the Kingdom of Xianle's morality and a mark against Xie Lian as both a leader and a god—the plague only affecting Xianle is "proof" that they angered the heavens, and Xie Lian being unable to cure it by his own power is "proof" that he does not have heaven's blessing and is not a true god.

PRIMORDIAL SPIRIT: The essence of one's existence beyond the physical. The body perishes, the soul enters the karmic wheel, but the spirit that makes one unique is eternal.

RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY AND CAVES: It is not uncommon to find religious iconography in cave networks, as caves have long been used as places of secluded meditation for followers of Daoist or Buddhist faiths. The Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves and the Tianlongshan Grottoes are extreme examples of this practice, containing hundreds of religious murals and over a thousand divine statues.

STEP-LITTER: (步辇) a "litter" is a type of wheelless vehicle. Palanquins and sedan chairs are in the same category of human-powered transport, but they often have boxed cabins. A step-litter is an open-air platform with a seat/throne atop it, often with a canopy of hanging silk curtains for privacy. Step-litters are usually reserved for those with high status.

QI: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with lush wildlife are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QIANKUN: *Qiankun* can be translated to “universe.” Qiankun pouches (乾坤袋) or Qiankun sleeves (乾坤袖) are containers that are bigger on the inside, used to easily carry cargo a person normally couldn’t manage. Qiankun items are common in fantasy settings.

RED STRING OF FATE: Refers to the myth in many East Asian cultures that an invisible red string connects two individuals who are fated to be lovers. The string is tied at each lover’s finger (usually the middle finger or pinky finger).

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: (七窍) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, two nostrils, mouth, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be “bleeding from the seven apertures.”

SHANGYUAN: Shangyuan Jie (上元節), or the Lantern Festival, marks the fifteenth and last day of the Lunar New Year (usually around February on the Solar Calendar). It is a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens by hanging lanterns, solving riddles, and performing Dragon Dances. Glutinous rice ball treats known as yuanxiao and tangyuan are highlights of this festival, so much so that the festival’s alternate name is Yuanxiao Jie (元宵節).

SHRINES: Shrines are sites at which an individual can pray or make offerings to a god, spirit, or ancestor. They contain an object of worship to focus on such as a statue, a painting or mural, a relic, or a memorial tablet in the case of an ancestral shrine. The term also refers to small roadside shrines or personal shrines to deceased family members or loved ones kept on a mantle. Offerings like incense, food, and money can be left at a shrine as a show of respect.

SPIRIT BANNER: A banner or flag intended to guide spirits. Can be hung from a building or tree to mark a location or carried around on a staff.

STATE PRECEPTOR: State preceptors, or guoshi, are high-ranking government officials who also have significant religious duties. They serve as religious heads of state under the emperor and act as the tutors, chaplains, and confidants of the emperor and his direct heirs.

SWORDS: A cultivator’s sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed on them by their master or a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: Jianguang (剑光 / "sword light"), an energy attack released from a sword's edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals. Such a pact can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other's families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc. Sworn siblings will refer to themselves as brother or sister, but this is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with spells written on them, often with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

THE THREE REALMS: Traditionally, the universe is divided into Three Realms: the **Heavenly Realm**, the **Mortal Realm**, and the **Ghost Realm**. The Heavenly Realm refers to the Heavens and Celestial Court, where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the human world, and the Ghost Realm refers to the realm of the dead.

VINEGAR: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

WEDDING TRADITIONS: Red is an important part of traditional Chinese weddings, as the color of prosperity, happiness, and good luck. It remains the standard color for bridal and bridegroom robes and wedding decorations even today. During the ceremony, the couple each cut off a lock of their own hair, then intertwine and tie the two locks together to symbolize their commitment.

WHISK: A whisk held by a cultivator is not a baking tool but a Daoist symbol and martial arts weapon. Usually made of horsehair bound to a wooden stick, the whisk is based off a tool used to brush away flies without killing them and is symbolically meant for wandering Daoist monks to brush away thoughts that would lure them back to secular life. Wudang Daoist Monks created a fighting style based on wielding it as a weapon.

YAO: Animals, plants, or objects that have gained spiritual consciousness due to prolonged absorption of qi. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao. Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the cores they develop can be harvested by human cultivators to increase their own abilities.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

YUANXIAO: Sweet glutinous rice balls that are traditionally eaten at Shangyuan Jie, the Lantern Festival. This treat is so strongly associated with Shangyuan Jie that the festival is often known by the alternative name Yuanxiao Jie (元宵節).

ZHANMADAO: A large, two-handed bladed weapon that was designed to counter cavalry units.

ZHONGYUAN: Zhongyuan Jie (中元節), or the Ghost Festival / Hungry Ghost Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar Calendar (this usually falls around August/September on the Solar Calendar). The festival celebrates the underworld, and offerings are made to the dead to appease their spirits and help them move on.

ZONGZI: Glutinous rice balls stuffed with various fillings. The rice balls are wrapped in bamboo leaves, then steamed or boiled. Zongzi are famously associated with the Dragon Boat Festival, which sees them thrown into bodies of water as an offering to fish/other water spirits.

Footnotes

1. “Fire burning one’s brow” is an idiom for a desperate situation.

2. A ball of sticky rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves, usually with some kind of filling.

3. It is traditional to eat yuanxiao, glutinous rice flour dumplings with sweet fillings served in a soup, on Shangyuan. The food is so strongly associated with the holiday that it’s sometimes called the Yuanxiao Festival.

4. The riddles in this section are all based on changing the meaning of Chinese characters by cleverly adding or removing parts of the character based on the coded meaning of the sentence.

5. Peachwood is said to ward off evil.

6. A catty (斤) is a measurement of weight. Half a catty is around 300 grams.

About the Author

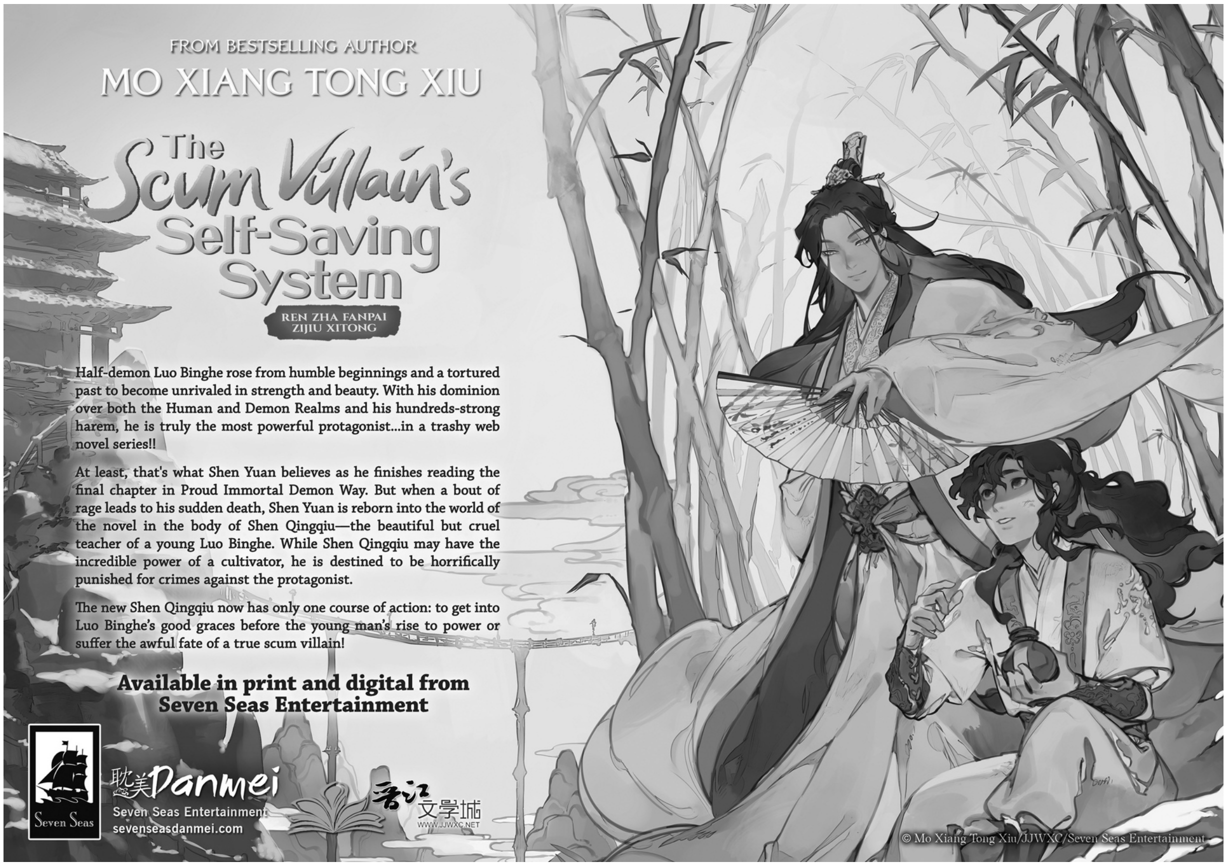
“A young superstitious girl,
renowned poster of memes;
a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;
and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.
...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.
...No, no, no, that’s even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone
who writes.

Yep.”

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing*. All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System
REN ZHA FANPAI
ZIJIU XITONG

Half-demon Luo Binghe rose from humble beginnings and a tortured past to become unrivaled in strength and beauty. With his dominion over both the Human and Demon Realms and his hundreds-strong harem, he is truly the most powerful protagonist...in a trashy web novel series!!

At least, that's what Shen Yuan believes as he finishes reading the final chapter in Proud Immortal Demon Way. But when a bout of rage leads to his sudden death, Shen Yuan is reborn into the world of the novel in the body of Shen Qingqiu—the beautiful but cruel teacher of a young Luo Binghe. While Shen Qingqiu may have the incredible power of a cultivator, he is destined to be horrifically punished for crimes against the protagonist.

The new Shen Qingqiu now has only one course of action: to get into Luo Binghe's good graces before the young man's rise to power or suffer the awful fate of a true scum villain!

Available in print and digital from Seven Seas Entertainment

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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation
MO DAO ZU SHI

Wei Wuxian was once one of the most outstanding men of his generation, a talented and clever young cultivator who harnessed martial arts, knowledge, and spirituality into powerful abilities. But when the horrors of war led him to seek a new power through demonic cultivation, the world's respect for his skills turned to fear, and his eventual death was celebrated throughout the land.

Years later, he awakens in the body of an aggrieved young man who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian can exact revenge on his behalf. Though granted a second life, Wei Wuxian is not free from his first, nor the mysteries that appear before him now. Yet this time, he'll face it all with the righteous and esteemed Lan Wangji at his side, another powerful cultivator whose unwavering dedication and shared memories of their past will help shine a light on the dark truths that surround them.

Available in print and digital from Seven Seas Entertainment

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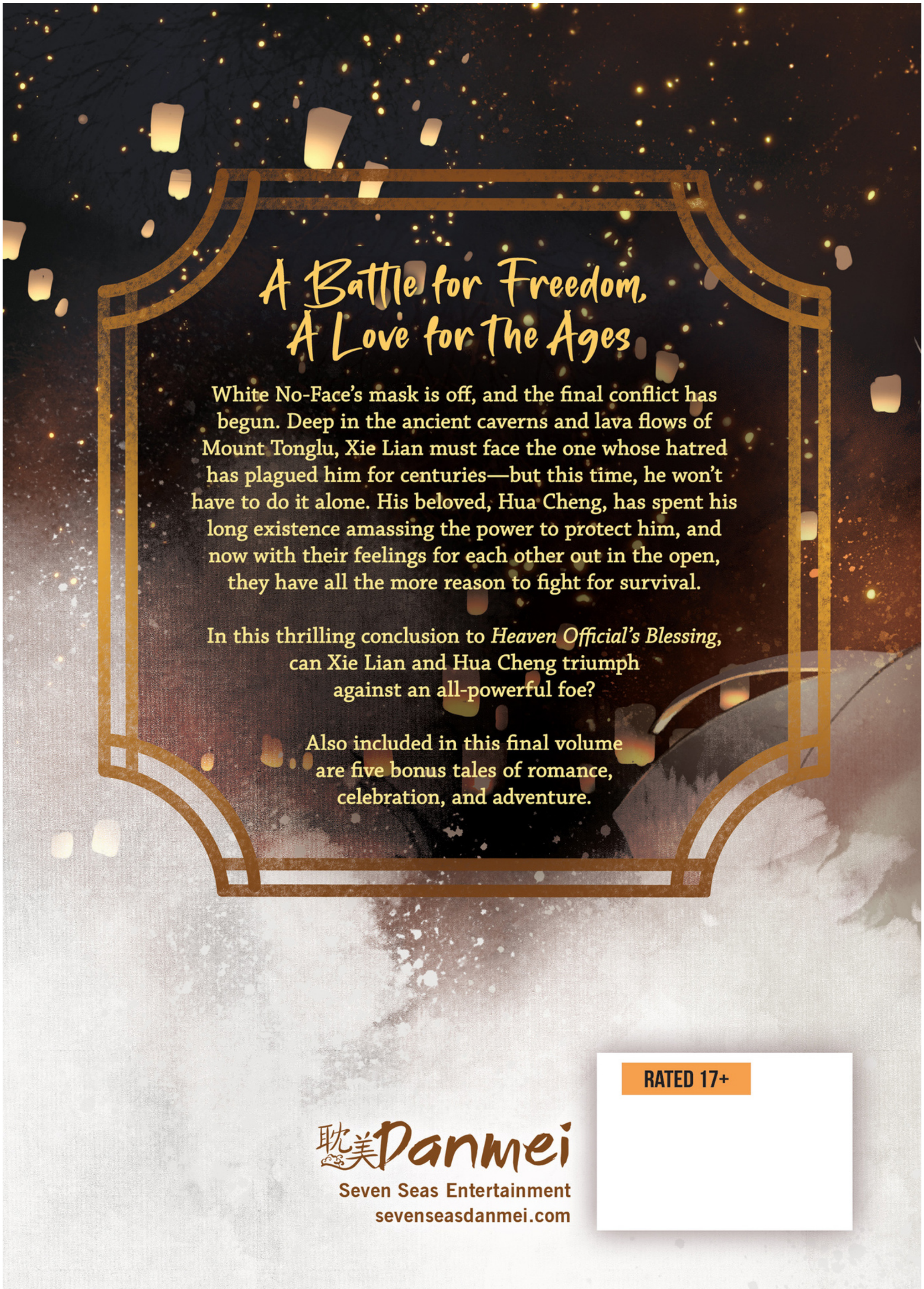

A Battle for Freedom, A Love for the Ages

White No-Face's mask is off, and the final conflict has begun. Deep in the ancient caverns and lava flows of Mount Tonglu, Xie Lian must face the one whose hatred has plagued him for centuries—but this time, he won't have to do it alone. His beloved, Hua Cheng, has spent his long existence amassing the power to protect him, and now with their feelings for each other out in the open, they have all the more reason to fight for survival.

In this thrilling conclusion to *Heaven Official's Blessing*, can Xie Lian and Hua Cheng triumph against an all-powerful foe?

Also included in this final volume are five bonus tales of romance, celebration, and adventure.

RATED 17+

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